The Denial of Motherhood in *Beloved* and *Crossing the River*

A Postcolonial Literary Study of How the Institution of Slavery Has Restricted Motherhood for Centuries

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to explore motherhood in two postcolonial literary works by African American author Toni Morrison and British author Caryl Phillips, who was born in the Caribbean. The essay is based on Morrison’s award winning novel *Beloved*, which was published in 1987 and was inspired by the escaping African American slave Margareth Garner. It is set just after the American Civil War and the novels deals with the trauma of slavery from the perspective of Sethe, a slave who kills her own daughter to save her from slavery. The second novel on which this essay is based is Caryl Phillips’ novel *Crossing the River*, which was published 1993 and focused on the African diaspora from different perspectives. *Crossing the River* is a non-chronological narrative covering four different characters (three African American people and one white slave trader during the eighteenth century). This essay, however, only deals with the last of the four narratives depicting white British Joyce who mothers a child with African American soldier Travis. The hypothesis on which the essay is based is that the institution of American slavery has denied the female protagonists in the two novels, Sethe and Joyce, their maternal selves. The analysis revealed that both women suffer from racial domination, and race, or simply skin color, is what leads to the maternal loss of the two protagonists. Both authors depict the world of the colonizer and the colonized and they address the common pain and guilt shared by black as well as white people.

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Introduction

“Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial ethnic women but for all women” (Collins, 45).

This essay aims to explore how the trauma of slavery and racial domination has influenced the right to motherhood, within the two novels Crossing the River (published in 1993), by Caryl Phillips and Beloved (published in 1987), by Toni Morrison. Patricia Hill Collins claims motherhood is heavily affected by racial domination, no matter the ethnicity of the individual. Through a close reading of the texts in question this essay will analyze how both Joyce, the British white female protagonist in Caryl Phillips' novel Crossing the River, and Sethe, the African American slave mother and protagonist of Toni Morrison's novel Beloved, are denied their maternal roles due to the institution of slavery and hence racial domination. Citing Barbara Christian, Mårdberg and Wahlström argue that motherhood is an important theme in novels by African American authors (16) and within the two novels, studied in this essay, motherhood, and the maternal loss, is indeed present as one of the main themes. Through a postcolonial critical analysis, the voices of those who have been silenced by the trauma of slavery, will be explored. The maternal roles of both the colonizer and the colonized are, as suggested by Hill Collins, affected by racial domination, and this essay will shine a light on the theme of lost motherhood through a postcolonial lens. Both Phillips and Morrison, contemporary authors covering diasporic issues in their writing, give voice to those who have suffered from racial oppression in an attempt to reclaim the past and articulate the cultural identity of the oppressed.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis which this essay is based on is that the institution of American slavery has severely influenced and obstructed the maternal roles of the female protagonists in the two novels. As Joyce's baby is fathered by the African American man Travis, white racial domination will prove to deny Joyce her maternal self to her
coffee-colored son Greer. Sethe is maternally disempowered due to being a black slave and African American, and thus not owning the right to her selfhood, neither mentally nor physically.

**Theoretical framework**

**Postcolonialism**

Postcolonial theory is a framework for postcolonial criticism which could be used when reading literature which display themes and attitudes that are relevant for postcolonial theory. Defining postcolonialism has proven difficult, but McLeod outlines a few different factors, which could be involved when considering a postcolonial approach. This study will focus on one of the factors, namely, how cultural texts, which are produced by writers migrating from once colonized countries or descendants from families with a history of migration, deal with some of the many consequences of diasporic experiences (McLeod 40).

Edward Said’s work *Orientalism*, which was published in 1978 and explored the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, encouraged new ways of studying colonialism and new forms for textual analysis of literature displaying postcolonial themes (21). Briefly, Orientalism could be described as the western ideological construction created in order to deal with the “otherness” of the eastern culture as well as eastern customs and beliefs. The concept of orientalism reflects the imperialism and racism of the Western world (Said). Orientalism constructs an “unequal dichotomy” (McLeod 49), where the east is always described and perceived as the negative and inferior, compared to the west, which then obviously offers a representation of the superior. Orientalism is also about the fantasies and perception of the west – “a western fantasy”, according to McLeod. Furthermore, the assumptions of orientalism are institutionalized and also literary and creative (49-51). Barry suggests the West associates the East with homogeneity, an exotic otherness of all people rather than individuals, and that their actions, feelings and beliefs are “determined by racial considerations” (Barry 193-194).

Originating from these assumptions the theory of postcolonial criticism emerged in the 1990’s. Postcolonial critics reject the idea that great literature is timeless and universal, since assumptions of ‘universalism’ would ignore the cultural, social, regional
and national differences. When performing postcolonial criticism, the context of the literature needs to be considered in order to highlight representations of cultural differences and to display the limitations of the canonical Western literature (192-193, 199). Barry claims: “Whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, then, white, Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted by a sleight of hand to this elevated status, and all others correspondingly relegated to subsidiary, marginalized roles” (193). By taking on a universalist approach the European, white, is promoted and considered the standard, whereas the East becomes the opposite associated with “cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness and so on” (193). Homogeneity is also rejected and McLeod has called postcolonialism an emancipatory concept as it allows readers and writers to re-interpret the literary representations of the colonized, from a specific historical and geographical perspective (McLeod 162).

Literally, postcolonialism, means after colonialism, but the literal meaning should not confuse the reader into believing this is the era after colonialism, that colonialism has simply ended because large parts of the world have been decolonized. Colonialism does not simply “stop” because the colonizers have signed a treaty promising independence to the colony. On the contrary, colonialism, or its consequences and the ideals, ideas and mindsets of a racial hierarchy, still affect the lives of both previously colonized people, as well as the previous colonizers. Postcolonialism, thus, essentially concerns the continued influence of colonialist values on the previously colonized and previously colonizers (39). The term neocolonialism is often used to describe the continued western influence and exercise of power in former colonized states. The term was first used in 1965 by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, as the former colonies in Africa started to gain formal independence but still suffered from the informal western dominance (Darity 466).

One critique of postcolonialism is that the representations of gender have been marginalized and treated as subsidiary to race (McLeod 198). However, McLeod, claims the concepts are closely linked and can be considered simultaneously and he also claims there is a double colonization of women, since women are marginalized both through the concept of patriarchy and colonialism. Both women of the colonized and the colonizing cultures (201) are exposed to this double colonialism and this concept will also be explored in this essay.
Historical background

The Institution of Slavery

For hundreds of years the institution of slavery has served as a tool to dehumanize black people who have been forced into slavery which not only robbed the women of their self-hood but also of their motherhood. Historian Heather Andrea Williams claims: “Belonging to another human being brought unique constrictions, disruptions, frustrations, and pain” (Williams). The famous quote: “Death is better than slavery” (Jacobs 56) was written by a slave writer – Harriet Jacobs in 1861 – and it conveys the terror slaves had to endure.

One of the most famous American slave writers, Frederick Douglass, has described the exploitation of black slaves, and the cruelty facing them is ever present in his novel Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, which was published originally in 1845 by the Anti-Slavery Office in Boston. He accounts for scenes where slaves are whipped until covered in blood, screaming for their life, while other slaves witnessed it, thus making them silent participants in the terror (19). Douglass claims the witnessing of how his aunt was “[whipped] upon her naked back until she was literally covered with blood” as “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it” (19). The slaves were not only owned physically by the white masters but also mentally. They were refused the right to their mental selves through for example being denied the knowledge of their birthdays.

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record concerning it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses knew of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday […] A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent. (15)
In many cases they were also denied knowing the truth about their origin. Many mulatto slave children knew nothing about their fathers but it was common that they shared both the master-slave bond and father-son bond with their owners, who in many cases fathered slave children.

Historical documents and the narrative of Douglass clearly demonstrate how slaves had to endure severe mental abuse, besides the physical terror, and were in many cases deprived of their humanity and self-hood.

Black Motherhood in Antebellum America

Motherhood (parenting) and family life are two central concepts when it comes to people’s right to their self-hood. Historian Heather Andrea Williams claims: “Slavery not only inhibited family formation but made stable, secure family life difficult if not impossible” (Williams), hence the institution of slavery made family life among the enslaved hard. As already concluded, slaves were not free and did not even own their own body or mind. Nor did the black women own their babies: “Her reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers” (Carby 25). As stated by Hazel Carby, it was also decided that children inherited their status from their mothers, according to the law of Partus Sequitir Ventrem (Kennedy 160) which meant children born to slave mothers were deemed to face lives as slaves.

The accounts of unstable family formations and restrained maternal roles during slavery are many in the narrative of Frederick Douglass. He affirms the bond between the mother and child was usually broken at an early stage:

It is a common custom […] to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it […] For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result (16).
The affectionate bond between mother and child was heavily disrupted and thus the maternal loss was immense. According to Williams, even those who did not in fact suffer from family separations were heavily affected by the terror of being exposed to the same trauma. She claims: “The fear of separation haunted adults who knew how likely it was to happen. Young children, innocently unaware of the possibilities, learned quickly of the pain that such separations could cost” (Williams).

Mothers were evidently deprived of their maternal roles and in his narrative Douglass describes his relationship with his mother as that of a stranger, whom he never knew “I never saw my mother […] I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day” (16). When she died his feelings did not correspond to those expected by a loving son “Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (17).

Besides exploiting the mothers’ productive labor, which was seen as more valuable compared to nurturing a child, Shaw suggests that the breaking of the natural bond between the baby and the slave mother was intended to deny women of their self-hood and femininity, as motherhood defined a woman in Antebellum America and the slave owners efficiently denied female slaves the right to their maternal roles (Shaw 242). She also claims: “There is much evidence to suggest enslaved women’s interest in mothering their children, but often women’s efforts were brutally conditioned by the structure of the larger political economy, and by the slaveholders who worked to sustain it” (242). Hence, the racial dominance, which denied many enslaved women their roles as mothers, was not only that of individual slaveholders but enforced by the powerful economic institutions of slavery. In her essay *Mothering Under slavery in the Antebellum South* Stephanie J. Shaw tells the story of a slave child, who was whipped because of saying to his mistress ‘my mother sent me’. She claims it was common children were not allowed to address their mothers as ‘mother’, because this was considered as intrusive of white tradition and culture (238).

The fact that slaves had no right to their own children is also supported by feminist writer Barbara Christian who claims: “mothers during slavery did not have their natural right to their children and did everything, including giving up their lives to
save them” (238). Here she introduces the idea that mothers would even commit infanticide, kill their newborns, in order to protect their children from the oppression and terror of slavery.

The Aftermath of Slavery in America and Britain

Even though slavery as an institution was abolished in 1865 the systematic racial oppression towards black people was still in use much later in society through the Jim Crow-laws. The Jim Crow-laws were enforced from the 1870’s to the mid 1960’s in Southern U.S. The laws secured the white superiority to the black people and systematically denied the black people the right to equality (Wynn). Thus black descendants of slavery were still restrained in almost every aspect of daily life due to the color of their skin.

The Second World War largely increased the black population in Great Britain as approximately 130 000 black American GI’s arrived with the US army (Wynn 324). Besides the 130 000 African-American descendants of slaves, American segregation and discrimination due to the Jim Crow-laws, was also transported and exported over the Atlantic. There is much evidence that the British government was not completely at ease with the American policy of segregation, but referring to an article in the Bristol Evening Post from 1942, Neil A Wynn claims British Prime Minister Churchill argued that the British government should not interfere with the American policies. Wynn states Churchill called the situation: “‘certainly unfortunate’, but thought ‘the points of view of all concerned will be mutually understood and respected’” (331). Hence the British government advised for acceptance towards the racial discrimination exported by the Americans and they also urged for people not to become “too friendly with coloured American troops” (331). The British Minister of Information was also quoted as saying: “I am sure that the American policy of segregation is the best practical contribution to the avoidance of trouble. Let us second it in every way” (331), which reveals the ambiguous attitudes of the British towards the colored men arriving during the war. The British government also tried to reduce the presence of Black troops in Britain due to, for example, concerns about black and white sexual mixing (Schaffer 248-249). Black troops were not favored and a report from the Secretary of State, James Grigg, which Gavin Schaffer refers to, reinforces the idea of a common belief in black inferiority: “While there are many coloured men of high mentality and cultural
distinction, the generality are of a simple mental outlook … In short they have not the white man’s ability to think and act to a plan” (249). Black people were considered to be of “different species […] essentially unlike white Britons (252) and their mental capacity was compared to that of animals (253)

As the number of black men increased in Great Britain during the war so did the mixed-race relationships. The result of these sexual encounters were illegitimate children, who became known as “brown babies” (Wynn 338) or “war causalities” (Alagiah). The children were stigmatized and many mothers decided to give their babies up for adoption as they were a burden of shame (Alagiah). Historian Rickie Solinger claims: “After World War II … The black illegitimate baby became the child white politicians and taxpayers loved to hate” (287). Solinger refers to the American views of “these half-breeds”, but the view was shared by the British government, which encouraged mothers to ship their babies across the Atlantic to the US where the children were thought to have a far better chance of a normal life (Tibbetts). There is much evidence that the racial domination brought by the American troops was already somewhat institutionalized as Britain still practiced racial dominance on a worldwide basis, and the view of colonial people was still influenced by the belief of black inferiority.

Discussion

Nobel and Pulitzer Prize award winning author Toni Morrison is known to depict the effects of white dominance and oppression on black people’s lives. In her literary works she describes “characters in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison’s world is more often psychic violence” (Davis 7).

Indisputably, racial oppression is a central theme in her novel and in Beloved these themes are particularly present. Besides the racial oppression towards black people, motherhood is one of the central themes in Beloved, and according to Andrea O’Reilly (2004) Morrison, herself a black writer, often reflects upon the topic of black motherhood both in and out of her novels (1). In her book Toni Morrison and Motherhood O’Reilly claims “As is made apparent in Beloved, slavery, more than any other cultural institution or historical event, damaged the African American motherline
by denying African people their humanity and history” (74). Furthermore, she continues: “Beloved, a novel of slavery, and its aftermath, shows that slavery […] severed African American motherline by separating families through sale and by commodifying African Americans as property, robbing them of their subjectivity and history”. She claims slavery as an institution has not only functioned as a tool to dehumanize and diminish African Americans into property, but also to disrupt the motherline of African American women. O’Reilly’s assertions will be proved through examining the narrative evolving around the main character Sethe.

In the novel Beloved the reader is introduced to the atrocities of the American institution of slavery and its consequences mainly through the life of the black slave woman Sethe, and the characters evolving around her. The very first lines of the novel indicate that the story is about more than one slave mother’s experiences as the first lines are: “Sixty Million and more” (Morrison author’s preface), implying this story is applicable to sixty million people. The narrative, however, centers on the character Sethe and her family living in the aftermath of slavery. The plot is set just after the abolition of slavery but as shown in the theory section racial domination still shaped the lives of black African Americans long after the abolition of slavery. Some of the central happenings in the novel did however occur in the fictional past when slavery had not yet been abolished. Rather immediately the reader is introduced to the center of the novel, the ghost Beloved – the dead baby girl – who haunts Sethe and her daughter Denver and continues to rupture family life. The ghost is blamed for chasing off Sethe’s two boys and she is left in the “spiteful” (3) house 124 with her daughter Denver.

Initially the reader has no knowledge of how the baby, Beloved, died, except that “her baby blood [had] soaked [Sethe’s] fingers like oil” (5) and that Sethe loved her dearly (4). It is not until the reader has got acquainted to Beloved, and Denver has got attached to her, that the truth about Beloved’s death starts to unravel. Halfway through the novel Baby Suggs remembers how “a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children” (158) and the reader gains knowledge of how Beloved really died: Sethe is herself responsible for her daughter's death as she cut the baby's throat to save her from falling into the hands of the slave owner, whose hat she had recognized.

After running away from the plantation and the schoolteacher, who was the current owner of Sethe and her babies, she settles at 124 with Baby Suggs, whose
freedom was bought by her son Halle. For the first time in her life she experiences what true motherhood is about. She is able to care for her children and when explaining to Paul D why she killed Beloved she claims she could never go back to not being able to sow a piece of clothing for her babies, which is one aspect of motherhood to Sethe. She recalls how she forgot the prettiest cloth with stripes and flowers on, which Mrs. Garner gave her, at the plantation and ever since then she had been longing to sow something for her daughter.

So when I got here, even before they let me get out of bed, I stitched her a little something from a piece of cloth Baby Suggs had. Well, all I’m saying is that’s a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn’t let all that go back to where it was, I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under the schoolteacher. That was out’ (162-163).

The “selfish pleasure” she speaks of is simply the act of mothering and caring for her children by sowing them something nice. She had never before had the opportunity to make something for her children and when knowing what motherhood was about she could not imagine giving it up again.

Sethe's explanation when talking to Paul D about her repulsive act is simple: “the truth was simple … ‘I stopped him,' she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. 'I took and put my babies where they'd be safe”’ (249-250). She feared the schoolteacher’s arrival would send her back to the place where she was robbed of her self-hood as well as her motherhood. She dreads the mere thought of having to surrender her children to slavery and thus losing the right to her children, and also facing the possibility of her children's death: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine … She had to be safe and I put her where she would be … if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (302). Thus, her actions were determined by the terror and trauma of slavery, as suggested also by authors Carl D Malmgren in “The root cause of Sethe's action is indeed the institution of slavery” (70) and Marianne Hirsch “familial structures in [Beloved] are profoundly distorted by the institutions of slavery” (6). To Sethe motherhood is about keeping one's babies safe and when failing to do so she desperately decides to kill her own children
and plans to also kill herself so that “they would all be together on the other side, forever” (358).

As stated initially by the author Morrison the story of Sethe and the infanticide are applicable to many black African Americans and Marianne Hirsch argues that: “When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voices in their upbringing” (197). In the novel Sethe reflects on the impossibility of being a mother while being trapped in slavery: “Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love” (Morrison 247). Sethe knows she does not own her daughter, she is the mere “property” (Carby 25) of the slave holder and in fact of slavery. When Paul D asks Sethe to have a baby with him, Sethe’s view of motherhood is revealed, “Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer” (Morrison 132). She believes it is not possible to be a loving mother in the situation she finds herself. The only possible way to be a mother is to be “carefree” (132), because caring for your children would hurt too much to survive.

During a long time, the institution of slavery deprived black people of their self-hood and especially mothers of their motherhood. Not allowing Sethe the human need of having a proper wedding is one way in which she is dehumanized. Sethe seeks support from the friendly wife of her previous owner, Mrs. Garner, to be allowed to have a wedding. Mrs. Garner responds with a laugh, implying Sethe’s hopes are ridiculous – slaves were not entitled to normal weddings, they belonged to white people’s traditions. Mrs. Garner answers “You are one sweet child” (26) and touches Sethe on the head and by doing so she clearly demonstrates Sethe’s wishes of a proper wedding is intrusive of white tradition and culture, as suggested by Shaw. Not only is she denied her self-hood and dehumanized by being robbed of a wedding due to the color of her skin she is also denied a burial for her dead daughter. Thirdly, she is denied her self-hood as she is unable to pay and hence forced to offer her body as a favor to the engraver to have her dead daughter’s headstone engraved. He offers to engrave the baby’s headstone with seven letters if Sethe “allows” him ten minutes of sexual exploitation. She chooses ‘Beloved’, which is “the one word that mattered” (5) from what she remembers the preacher saying at the funeral of her daughter.

There are several examples of how the slaves are dehumanized and equated with animals throughout Morrison's novel. As Sethe tries to explain her motive for killing her
child to Paul D he compares her to an animal by saying: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” (252). Paul D’s opinions of Sethe shows her actions were not only condemned by white people but also by her fellow slaves in her own community. On numerous occasions Morrison includes descriptions of the black slaves from the white people's point of view and by doing so she reinforces the image of the black slaves being equal, or even less worth than animals.

Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education … Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway … see how he liked it; see what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of … you just can't mishandle creature and expect success (230-231).

The schoolteacher talks about how the former slave-owner Garner “mated them niggers” (340), which is usually an act associated with animals and he is outraged by Garner planning to let the slaves marry. The schoolteacher even regards the black slaves as inferior to animals: “Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin” (228). The comparison between slaves and animals is evident also to Sethe as she feels like she is treated no better than an animal, “they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat”, she says. White dominance has yet again proven to dehumanize the black character Sethe by making her feel like an animal.

In Beloved the negative consequences of the institution of slavery on black people are obvious. However, there are instances in the novel where slavery also dominates the lives of white people, which will also be shown in the second novel to be explored. Stamp Paid claims white people are also damaged by slavery: “It invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made” (199). By showing the suffering of both white and black people Morrison effectively reclaims the past brings it out in the open, even though “it [is] not a story to pass on” (275), even though she, in the epilog, claims this is a story forgotten by both
perpetrators and victims. By doing so she also addresses the common shame and guilt and tries to unite the people, showing that slavery as an institution has severely hurt all Americans, regardless of skin color. Only by acknowledging the past can the future be freed from racial oppression and dominance.

Throughout the novel the notion of milk reoccurs and it serves as a symbol for motherhood. When Paul D arrives at the house of Sethe, which Morrison calls 124, Sethe tells him about the incident when she was beaten and whipped so badly her back was scarred so bad it looks like a tree. Paul D is distraught by the violence, but Sethe seems more indignant about the fact the two rapist boys stole her milk:

‘They used cowhide on you?’
‘And they took my milk’
‘They beat you and you was pregnant’
‘And they took my milk!’ (17)

Turning to what Sethe said just prior to her conversation with Paul D shows the robbed milk is a symbol for lost motherhood for Sethe. To her the importance of the milk is much greater than being beaten and raped.

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me (16).

As Sethe is unable to provide a stable family life for her children, while being trapped in slavery at Sweet Home, she seems to see milk and nursing as more than just feeding her children, more than making sure their hunger is satisfied. Besides the obvious value of giving the babies the necessary nutrition, she seems to think that nursing her babies is the mere essence of motherhood. Sethe cannot provide a safe home, nor warm clothes or any of the commodities of the white family, but she can
provide her babies nutritious food and also a moment of maternal care, which she is usually unable to do while working the fields away from her children.

Further on in the novel, when Sethe reflects upon how she will prove her love for Beloved, she reasons about her milk again. She has made up her mind of never letting anyone steal it from her again. By explaining how tender she cared for her milk she hopes Beloved will understand she loved her, despite of the fact she slit her throat. In this section milk once again functions as a symbol for motherhood and love and how she was robbed of both of it while being trapped in slavery, but now as she is free she will never again surrender and give up her maternal role.

When I explain it she’ll understand, because she understands everything already. I’ll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else – and the one time I did it was took from me – they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma’am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. I’ll tell Beloved about that; she’ll understand. She my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it (200).

Accepting milk as a symbol for love and motherhood, what Sethe is saying is that she is hoping Beloved will see that Beloved is “The one [she] managed to have [love and motherhood] for and to get it to her even after they stole it”. In this episode her relationship with her own mother is also presented — Sethe’s mother was also denied nursing Sethe and Sethe had to rely on her grandmother’s milk. Sethe, being a slavechild was the last baby to be fed and the hierarchy between black and white is clearly stated as the “whitebabies” got fed first.

The second novel to be explored in this essay, Crossing the River by Caryl Phillips, tells the stories of four different characters, all with different bonds to the African diaspora and all influenced by the institution of American slavery. Being of
Caribbean ancestry, but brought up in a white area of Britain author Bénédicte Ledent claims Phillips himself suffered from “cultural confusion” (2). Exile and displacement are two themes common in many of Phillips’ works and Ledent (3) suggests that his own feeling of never belonging in Britain, although feeling British, has clearly influenced his writing. In *Crossing the River* Phillips conveys a vibrant feeling of displacement and shines light on the African diaspora and the consequences of slavery many years after its abolition.

The sentence “A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children” (Phillips 1) both begins and ends the prologue as well as the epilog, which signals that this is the essence of the novel. The sentence implies that children are property, or a commodity, which could be sold in times of hardship, just like Carby describes the terms of life, if being born a black child to a mother caught in slavery in Antebellum America. The African father, who is the speaker of the prologue, condemns his own actions when selling his three children “I soiled my hand with cold goods in exchange for their warm flesh. A shameful intercourse” (1). He is ashamed of his actions and has regretted it for a quarter of a millennium. He repeats “for two hundred and fifty years” (1, 2) when describing how he traded off his children, whom he calls “My Martha. My Nash. My Travis”, which implies the threat of being sold as a commodity or perceived as property or goods has shaped the lives of children from the African diaspora for “two hundred and fifty years”. Phillips’ novel is non-chronological and covers four different characters who are all wounded by the institution of slavery, or the consequences following in the aftermath of slavery, just like the characters in Morrison's *Beloved* did a couple of years before *Crossing the River* was published. The first chapter focuses on the freed slave Nash who is going to Liberia for missionary work in the 1830’s, the second chapter focuses on Martha, a runaway slave mother around the 1850s and 60s in America, and the third section focuses on the slave trader James Hamilton in the 1750’s. Lastly the novel focuses on Joyce, the white Englishwoman who falls in love with the black American GI Travis during the Second World War. Chronologically, the first of the four stories takes place around the early 1750’s. Adding two hundred and fifty years, which the narrator has spent regretting the trade with his children, leads the reader into the 21st century. What Phillips is conveying here is the idea that racial domination is still present in the 21st century and still shapes lives of both former colonialized people and former colonizing people.
This part of the discussion will however focus on the last of the four narratives—the wartime romance between Joyce and the African American soldier Travis. He is one of the children the absent African father sold in the prologue, and hence one could argue this narrative belongs to Travis, and not his love Joyce, whose life is the center of the section. However, by focusing on Joyce, Phillips shifts focus from the once colonized to the colonizing counterpart, which white British Joyce represents. By doing this he effectively demonstrates how the trauma of slavery and racial oppression have affected both parties and that the values and mindsets of colonialism and racial hierarchy is present in the past, in the present and in the future. In her article “‘A Chorus of Common Memory’: Slavery and Redemption in Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*”, where she discusses the connection between modernity and slavery, Gail Low pinpoints this exact idea by claiming: “The history of slavery is not a ‘black’ problem”, meaning both parties have been damaged by the institution of slavery.

The explored narrative covers Joyce’s life during the late 1930's to the early 1960's. Even though Joyce is a white working class woman in the 20th century she is maternally disempowered, according to Hill Collins, because of the “racial domination […] [that] profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial ethnic women but for all women” (Collins, 45). Joyce may be a British white woman, but as Collins argues, the mothering context of all women will subject to racial domination and as Joyce's baby is fathered by the black African American man Travis, racial domination will prove to deny Joyce her motherhood.

Even though Joyce's story begins in 1936 and slavery as an institution has been abolished for over 70 years in America, racial differences still influence everyday life in both Britain and America. Joyce herself is clearly not concerned with the different ethnicity between her and Travis, which according to Wynn and Schaeffer, was a huge disturbance for both people and governments of both America and Britain. She seems unconcerned with the inappropriateness of their interracial relationship and what other people will think of the two of them: “He asked me if I thought it was proper that he should go into the pub with me. I looked at him and told him that there was nothing wrong with his going into the pub with me. Why should there be?” (Phillips 208). Joyce rejects the stereotypical image of the black inferiority by not acknowledging her own racial superiority. Black African American Travis represents the exotic otherness, or the east as suggested by Edward Said, but throughout the novel he is portrayed as the civil
person in the relationship. He knows prayers, he is polite, calm and friendly. “Some people asked him for a Lucky Strike. He always gave away two, and a smile” (202).

The behavior of Joyce on the other hand, is different and not expected from a white woman in the 40’s in Britain. She does not care about the opinions of the other villagers or what they think of her and her interracial relationship to Travis, even though their relationship will restrict her life. The portrayals of Joyce and Travis both contrast the representations of white and black people created by the western world, and by doing so Phillips reclaims the past of the oppressed, as well as his own past in ways, trying to highlight the cultural differences and reject universalism and stereotypes created by the west.

Moreover, Joyce is also delighted when Travis initially notices the difference between her and the other presumably white villagers: “You from round here? Why? I asked. Well, I was just wondering. I don't know. I guess you don't act like them in some ways. Can't say how exactly, but just different. Inside I was smiling. That was just what I wanted to hear”. Joyce demonstrates feelings of displacement and alienation in the white community where she lives, just like the author Phillips did in the white working area where he grew up.

Joyce knows the interracial relationship with Travis is impossible in America (due to the Jim Crow-laws) “He'd already told me that we couldn't live together in America. It wouldn't be allowed” (Phillips 225), but still she chooses to marry Travis in a freezing room in front of two unknown witnesses. Just like Sethe, she is denied a proper wedding to her black fiancé and she is made ridicule by the Registrar, who is conducting the wedding. As Joyce's first husband Len finally divorces her and lets her out of the destructive relationship between the two of them, he tells her she is “a traitor of [her] own kind … [and] no better than a common slut. And everybody in the village agrees with him” (Phillips 217). Hence, black people are still seen as inferior and of a different kind compared to white people, as suggested by Schaffer. When the troops arrive in Britain even the white officer acknowledges the superiority of white people when he “[tells] tales on his fellow soldiers behind their backs” (145) and says to Joyce: “A lot of these boys are not used to us treating them as equals […] They’re not very educated boys and they’ll need some time to adjust to your customs and your ways” (145).

In her relationship with Len, Joyce also rejects the patriarchal hierarchy as she refuses to conform to the expected ways of a woman. When being stared at when she
goes to the bar for a beer, which is usually a place where men meet and drink, she refuses to be considered an intruder: “They look at me as though I’m in the way. I stare back at them” (137). She seems to despise the men in the bar and reject their ideas of women “I hear one of them whisper, She can’t take her drink. If I had twenty-three shillings I’d buy a bottle of whisky. Just to show them” (138). As Len and she go on their honeymoon her inner thoughts about Len and their relationship are revealed. She thinks a joke of him and the idea that a man would protect her. “Me, I didn’t want to be anybody’s charity case. Especially not when I was supposed to be with my husband. The man who said that he would protect and honour me. Some joke” (143).

Further on in the novel, as Joyce gives birth to her coffee-colored son, her maternal role is immediately questioned and restrained. She knows people think she would be better off without her black son and she knows her maternal role is about to be lost.

Nobody said anything, but when they lifted him clear of my body and began to towel him down, I knew what they were thinking. I stared at him. My beautiful son. The nurse placed him in my arms. He is like coffee, isn't he, love. I had no idea then that his father would never see him. Later, after I got the telegram, after the war was over, the lady with the blue coat came to visit. I could see her looking at me and thinking, poor disillusioned cow. You'll be better off, love, with somebody else looking after him. Trust me. I know what I am on about. I mean, how are you going to cope? You won't know what to do now, will you. Let's be sensible. You are going to have to start a new life on your own. And so we were sensible, my son and I. My son who hadn't asked me to turn him over to the lady with the blue coat and maroon scarf (Phillips 228).

This is also supported by the historian Rickie Solinger, who claims: “After World War II … The black illegitimate baby became the child white politicians and taxpayers loved to hate” (287). Solinger’s arguments concern America, but as suggested by Wynn and Schaffer the brown babies in Britain were no more popular than the black illegitimate babies in America. Ironically, since it is the skin color of the babies that make them unwanted, Joyce’s white skin is what forces her to give up her son for
adoption. Had Joyce herself been a black woman her chances of keeping her child would have been increasingly larger as black mothers had to keep their babies in almost every case (298) since black babies were not wanted at adoption agencies due to their inferior race, which is suggested by Solinger. Wynn and Schaffer claim the brown war babies were given up for adoption also in Britain since the chances of a better life were considered much larger in America or in a new adoptive family (preferably black) than alone with their white unmarried mothers, unless the skin of the babies was white and the black heritage was undetectable. Thus, when Travis dies Joyce is, due to her “maternal powerlessness” (Mårdberg & Wahlström 16) and, as suggested by Solinger, Wynn and Schaffer, her (white) race, forced to put up her son Greer for adoption. Racial domination, deriving from the institution of slavery, thus serves as a tool to deny Joyce her motherhood.

When, many years later, Greer shows up at Joyce’s house where she lives with her new family, the lost motherhood is at display again. Joyce's feelings at the return of her son are complicated: “I stared at Greer and longed for him to stay as dearly as I longed for him to leave. I'd explained that I thought he should go before the children came back” (223). Although she wants him to stay she knows their mother-son-relationship is forever lost and destroyed. “I knew he would never call me mother” (223), she laments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both works share the theme of maternal loss due to racial domination, which in turn derived from the institution of slavery. Both women suffer from the racial oppression of colonial rule and, as suggested by McLeod, there is evidence they are victimized twice; from colonization as well as by patriarchal structures. Joyce is bullied by her abusive husband Len and initially she is ruled by him. Only after her husband is caught in criminal activity and sent to prison is she able to divorce him and gain some independence. As Len loses his personal prestige and his manhood is restrained, when being exposed as a criminal and sent to prison, she is empowered and able to force him to accept their separation. Even though she displays strength and drive when devoting herself to the stigmatized inter-racial relationship with Travis, her life is still severely controlled by the patriarchal structures of her community. Also Sethe is victimized from patriarchal structures as the institution of slavery in itself is shaped by patriarchal authority. Her life is restrained from the
presence of male violence, even though the presence of strong women and the fellowship among women shape the black community she lives in at 124.

As already concluded there is evidence that the two women are marginalized twice, by patriarchal structures, but mainly by colonial rule and its racial domination. Morrison’s character Sethe says “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison, 95), suggesting that even though she and many other slaves with her were freed, they still could not claim ownership of their selfhood. Even though slaves were granted freedom, the same racially biased ideals and mindsets were still at stake in society and thus “freedom” from slavery is not the same as freedom of racial domination, which is evident as both novels show how racial domination is present in the past, as well as the present and also in the future. Even though both women suffer from the same racial domination there are fundamental differences in the narratives as one protagonist is white and the other is black. Despite this crucial difference, they are both hurt by the same systematized racial bias and oppression and they suffer from the same sense of maternal loss. Joyce is a westerner, representing the former colonial power and the oppressor, but despite her skin color her life is ruled and governed by same racial oppression that black slaves, like Sethe, faced in the 1800’s in America. Black Sethe kills her own child as her daughter was sentenced to a life as a slave, according to Partus Sequitir Ventrem (the idea that babies follow their mother’s status). A hundred years later Joyce feels pressured to give up her son for adoption as he is “coffee-coloured”, even though he was conceived in a loving relationship. Had his skin been white, without any trace of his father’s “otherness”, the chances of him having a decent life with his white mother in a working class in Britain would have been much greater. In this case the notion of Partus Sequitir Ventrem is ruled out by the “one-drop-rule”, which claimed all people with any black ancestry were to be considered black. There is also another fundamental difference between the two women and their stories; how they lose their children. Sethe kills her own baby in a desperate manner in order to save her from slavery, whereas Joyce loses her coffee-coloured son Greer when she gives him up for adoption. The maternal desperation of the women is the same, but expressed in very different manners. During the 1800’s the black slave mothers had no choice to give their babies up for adoption, to save them from slavery and racial oppression. To Sethe, the panicked act of infanticide is hence the only possible way of saving her baby from slavery. By committing infanticide Sethe also demonstrates
defiance and resistance against the systematized racial oppression. As history moves forward desperate women find other ways to offer their babies a better life, hoping to relieve them from racial oppression. When Joyce’s story sets the option of giving up babies for adoption is possible and she chooses to give him up for adoption. As Joyce is depressed and devastated from losing her husband Travis in the war her mental state of mind is unstable. The reasons why she gave Greer up could be many, but Phillips outlines racial domination as the main reason for her actions.

Besides the maternal loss both women have in common, the novels share a few other features. Both female protagonists are denied a proper wedding solely due to their skin color, which serves to dehumanize both women. Both novels also contain the notion of otherness and the contrasts between black and white people. In Beloved the African American slaves are repeatedly likened to animals and the racial difference between the black and white people is significant to the novel. In Crossing the River black people are considered “another kind” and the racial differences are highlighted. Racial difference; otherness, is one of the important contrasts used in both novels. Both stories also convey a feeling of continuance, that the events of the novels are still ongoing. Even though Morrison’s story is set in the middle of the 1800’s and Phillip’s ranges from the 1750’s and “250 years” forward the common theme of racial oppression and domination is still ongoing, and existing in the past as well as the present and the future. They are also both stories of more than just one person, as suggested by Morrison in her novel as “Sixty Million and More” is the absolute first words of her novel. Morrison clarifies that the institution of slavery has severely damaged the lives of more than sixty million people.

Even though there are fundamental differences both novels share one common theme –how all women are subjected to racial domination and how motherhood is restricted and denied all women, no matter their ethnicity (Collins). This analysis has revealed that one of the aims of both novels is to shine a light on the consequences of racial domination, on both black and white people over time. Both novels show that the institution of slavery has robbed women, black as well as white, of their maternal selves for hundreds of years. By giving voice to the silenced stories of racial oppression Morrison and Phillips reclaim the past and articulate the consequences of the institution of slavery in both the western and eastern world. These two novels could be considered two important statements in the “emancipatory” work of postcolonial writing.
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