



FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDIES  
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# Thick Love

A Psychoanalytical Study of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Toni  
Morrison's *Beloved*

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## **Abstract**

This study employs psychoanalytical theories to explore how the conscious, unconscious, and subconscious workings of the mind, combined with a search for identity, are presented and dealt with in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). It is done through a close reading and in-depth textual analysis of thematic concerns raised in the work. Previous research has primarily relied on some specific aspects of psychoanalytic theory and applied it to *Beloved*. The theoretical framework provides a rationale for this paper to research two events in particular that highlight the mother-daughter relationships between Sethe and her Ma'am and between Sethe and her daughter Beloved. These relationships are consequently analyzed by employing psychoanalytical concepts offered by Freud, Lacan and Kristeva. By utilizing psychoanalytical criticism, the characters' conscious and unconscious motives and feelings are revealed and explained, as well as the meanings and the undercurrents that lie underneath the text's consciousness. The results suggest that Sethe murdered her daughter Beloved to keep her from becoming a slave and enduring the dreadful and traumatic consequences of slavery, which was similar to what Sethe went through when she was abandoned by her Ma'am. Sethe's childhood psychological principles and trauma shaped her identity as a mother as she witnessed her mother abandoning her at a young age by being tortured and killed. The events around Sethe's mother's death and the fact that Sethe never identifies her mother's dead body, scar Sethe for life and instill in Sethe a sense of "lack" and an abnormal feeling of maternal love where she is ready to kill her children to save them from the horror of slavery.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytical Criticism, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison, Abjection, Semiotic, Symbolic, Imaginary, Mirror-stage, Defense Mechanism

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## 1. Introduction

Born on 18th February 1931, Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison was an American novelist, editor, short-story writer, essayist and lecturer. She published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. For her second novel, *Song of Solomon*, Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award and Janet Heidinger Kafka Award in 1977. Morrison gained worldwide recognition when she won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* and later Noble Prize for Literature in 1993. Her works are known for their unique language, epic themes, and exquisite details of the experience of Black American characters, who remain central to all her narratives. Known as Toni Morrison in the literary world, she died of pneumonia in August 2019 at the age of 88. Due to its diversity of themes, richness in style and complexity of the narrative, *Beloved* remains one of the most read and critically acclaimed novels in American fiction. Margaret Atwood calls it “a hair-raiser” Fleur Morrison finds it “beautifully intense,” and Jane Smiley describes it as “dense but not long, dramatic but not melodramatic, particular and universal, shocking but reassuring, new but at the same time closely connected to the tradition of the novel, and likely to... change a reader's sense of the world” (Smiley).

Set in 1873, Toni Morrison’s fifth novel *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe from her pre-Civil war days when she survived as a slave in Kentucky to when she was living as a physically free, but psychologically enslaved woman, in Cincinnati Ohio. The novel is based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner, a black slave woman who escaped with her children and husband from a Kentucky plantation in 1856 and later killed her young daughter in an act of motherly devotion when the law officers tried to recapture them because she did not want her children to go back into slavery. In the novel, just like Garner, Sethe flees from slavery, and she later tries to kill her children

when her ex-master named “schoolteacher” catches up with her in Ohio. Sethe manages to kill her two-year-old daughter, and schoolteacher refuses to take Sethe back, as he thinks that she is crazy. Sethe tries to get “Dearly Beloved” inscribed on her daughter’s tombstone, but since she is unable to pay for all the letters, she only manages to get “Beloved” engraved on it.

The novel opens in 1873 Ohio, where Sethe is living with her teenage daughter Denver on 124 Bluestone Road, in a house that is haunted by the ghost of Sethe’s past and the child she killed. The book explores the lives of Sethe, her daughter Denver, her friend Paul D from “Sweet Home,” where they lived as slaves, and Beloved, the girl whom Sethe comes to believe is a reincarnation of her dead daughter. Paul D, who is also haunted by his heinous past encounters with slavery, is yet another character that relives his past trauma through memories and flashbacks. Paul D describes his objection to Sethe’s love for her children as “too thick” (Morrison). Through these characters, Morrison explores the themes of slavery, motherhood, masculinity, grief, memory, abandonment, jealousy, family, community, trauma, identity, and home in a post-Civil war world for the previously enslaved African Americans in America.

In her Foreword, Morrison writes: “To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way” (Morrison xix). The novel mirrors its fragmented, broken, and traumatized characters in its structure, language, and chronology. The narrative continuously shifts through flashbacks in time; traditional binaries of male/female, master/slave, black/white, free/bound, past/present and dead/alive are toppled. The characters move from the first-person pronoun to second, to third and back in ambiguous monologues. In a world destabilized by war and the shift from slavery to institutionalized slavery, language itself becomes an inadequate mode of

communication, morality loses its meaning and characters suffer physically, emotionally and psychologically to find ways in which they can make sense of their new-found unfamiliar world.

In her writing of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison takes up the task of creating “a new version” of African American history that portrays African Americans as the makers of their destinies rather than the usual image of pitiable victims or second-class citizens of America. As much as the novel discusses the physical plight of the former slaves, it closely deals with the psychological aftermath of that traumatic experience.

This study examines the novel by applying concepts from psychoanalytical criticism. Specifically, it aims to analyze the mother-daughter relationships between Sethe and her Ma’am and between Sethe and her daughter Beloved. After this introduction to the novel, the focus will be on presenting three major scholars that have had an impact on psychoanalysis as therapeutic techniques, but also in the realm of literature, feminism and philosophy. The third chapter of this study gives an account of previous psychoanalytic studies of the novel. Lastly, the fourth section provides an analysis of the novel by employing a psychoanalytical theoretical framework. In the analysis section, this study analyzes mother-daughter relationships by using tools that have been provided by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva.

## **2. Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism**

Psychoanalysis is related to language. It is defined as a “clinical practice or theoretical model, an interpretative strategy, concentrating particularly on the language which tries to render the body’s experiences, the role of sexuality in defining the self and the construction of subjectivity and gender” (Vice 1). Its core is “the belief that all

people possess unconscious thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories” (Cherry).

Psychoanalytic criticism interprets literature through psychoanalytical techniques (Barry 92), in which close reading is applied to study the characters’ language use, which in turn brings out the unconscious and repressed thoughts, feelings and desires of a character. Furthermore, psychoanalysis investigates the plot, the characters’ actions and relationship with other characters and what other characters, or the narrator says about them. Psychoanalysis was introduced as a psychoanalytical tool that was used as a form of therapy to cure mental disorders (Barry 70). Lacan used literature to demonstrate his own psychoanalysis theory and his reevaluation of Freud's, but he was not a literary scholar; Lacan was a psychiatrist and a practicing psychoanalyst. Freud, like Lacan, often used literature to illustrate his ideas. However, Kristeva is a literary critic, amongst other professions, who applied Lacanian psychoanalysis in her work.

## **2.1 Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)**

Sigmund Freud was the pioneer of the psychoanalytic school of thought in psychology and the first-ever neurologist to explain the workings of the human mind in scientific terms. Freud proposed his theories based on the idea of the *unconscious*. The concept of the unconscious is described by Freud as a part of the mind that is beyond conscious control but does play a decisive role in driving everyday actions. Linked with the unconscious, is the concept of *repression*, which is the “forgetting” or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or past traumatic events (Barry 92). In order to explain how or why the mind represses, Freud later introduces the theory of personality, according to which the human psyche is divided into three parts: *Id*, *Ego* and *Super Ego*. *Id* is the uncontrollable desire; *superego* is the moral psychology of a person, and the *ego* tries to balance between *id* and *superego* for the best possible satisfaction of the desire.

Freud later introduced the concepts of defense mechanisms, which “are techniques by which the ego balances id and superego” (Körez 13). These include repression, sublimation, projection, and displacement (Körez 13-14). The previously mentioned mechanisms help recognize the instincts behind some human behavior. Lacan used literature to illustrate his own psychoanalytic theory as well as his reevaluation of Freud's, but Lacan was no literary scholar; he was a psychiatrist and practicing psychoanalyst. Freud, like Lacan, often used literature to illustrate his concepts.

## **2.2 Lacanian Psychoanalysis**

Lacan was a French philosopher, critic, and psychoanalyst whose work on language and psyche had a major influence on what literary theory has come to be today. Lacanian psychoanalysis is most closely associated with language because for Lacan, the unconscious is not a mass of abstract thoughts (as Freud claimed), but rather “is structured like a language” (Barry 106).

This thesis draws some of its framework from Lacan's theory on language and the lack that arises due to the loss of the *objet a* (object of desire), which is associated with the infant's mirror stage and the subject's entry into the symbolic. According to Lacan, when the infant starts responding to its name, it indicates that the subject's relationship with the symbolic is established. Throughout its life, it then does everything in its power to feed its ego and bridge the gap between who it essentially is and what it believes its ideal “I” to be. Lacan states that this symbolic I cannot exist without the presence of the symbolic other's presence. Thus, the infant exists in its struggle to be recognized, to be accepted and to be approved by that other. Lacan writes “This lack is beyond anything which can represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil. The libido, but now no longer as used theoretically as a quantitative



quantity, is the name of what animates the deep-seated conflict at the heart of human action” (Barry 223).

### **2.2.1 The Mirror Stage**

Lacan’s most famous concept is that of the *mirror stage*, which he defines as “a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation [...] to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the infant’s entire mental development” (Lacan 1288). In other words, the child first sees itself and it recognizes itself as the object of the mother’s desire. After that, the baby falls into, and it recognizes language, which unlocks a world to the child that makes it recognize as what it lacks. It no longer sees itself as the ideal I. The child begins to recognize the competition of the desire between itself and the mother. It also recognizes that what itself desires is not accessible. It has no choice but to admire/envy (forming as an object of desire) what it lacks, the father. The "lack" is thus caused by the separation from the mother. It is also important to clarify that the object of lack is not a physical one. This stage is crucial for the formation of the ideal “I”.

### **2.2.2 Real, Imaginary and the Symbolic**

What Lacan proposes is that at first the child is not aware of itself as a separate identity and sees itself as part of the mother. There is no recognition of unattended individual desires or feelings. This phase is called the *real* and, in this realm, there is fulfilment and completeness for the child without a need for language. The infant coexists in this phase with the phase of the *imaginary* where the child has no distinction between the self and the Other while it is idealizing the mother (Barry 80). The mirror stage is the point at which the child starts seeing itself in the mirror as a separate entity, recognizes itself as an “*other*” and starts developing the “*ego*”. This marks the child’s entry into

the realm of the *symbolic*. It is a world that is marked by a kind of loss in which the child desires the return of the real. The *symbolic* is the world of the language that is recognized by the child's entry into adulthood.

### **2.2.3 Desire**

When the infant realizes that it is a separate entity from the mother, it suffers through a sense of utter loss. It is at this point sometime during the mirror stage that "the infant misidentifies his image on the mirror and names his reflection of the ego, "I" as the other" (Körez 26). It is this ideal or imaginary I that the child then strives to reach throughout its life but can never do so because it exists only in the imagination. This infinite attempt to achieve one's aim, which is the continuous, never-ending pursuit of satisfaction, is a concept Lacan defines as the "desire" (Fevre). This desire to find that "something missing" is experienced as a lack, and the individual is doomed to fill it, close it, or replace it with something else.

## **2.3 Kristevan Psychoanalysis**

A contemporary Bulgarian French psychoanalyst, Kristeva challenges both Freud's and Lacan's ideas with a feminist approach. According to Kristeva, it is not sexual instincts or language that should be at the core of the unconscious; rather it is the *affects* that are a fundamental driving force behind the conscious. Her focus lies more on the maternal role in the psychological development of the child, rather than the father as Freud and Lacan previously theorized. In order to explain and highlight the importance of the mother's effect on the child's subjectivity, Kristeva introduces three concepts: the semiotic (pre-oedipal desires), the chora (The Greek word for womb) and the abject (related to the emotions of fear and phobia) (Körez 44).

### 2.3.1 The Semiotic and the Symbolic

In her doctoral thesis, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva offers a fundamental categorical distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The former refers to the pre-Oedipal babble, rhythm and sound, contradictions, silences in language, poetic language and disruptions. The latter refers to the language as clearly represented objects with logic and order, and authority and power. In Kristevan terms, the semiotic and the symbolic refer to the matriarchal and patriarchal aspects of language. The repressed matriarchal part shows the speaker's inner drives, emotions and impulses, while the repressing symbolic is a rule-governed side of language that shows itself in the grammatical structures and the syntactic structures (Arya 20).

### 3.2.2 Theory of Abjection

In Kristeva's essay, *Powers of Horror* (1980), abjection is introduced to the infant by its experiences and realization that it (the infant) and the mother are separate beings. The infant inevitably accepts that its mother is the *other* and thus it discovers its selfhood and gets autonomy in language (Körez 46). Abjection, more than a developmental account of infantile separation, is the divergence of the Lacanian "*objet petit a*".

Abjection can be prompted as a reaction to horrifying items such as open wounds, feces, and corpses. Abjection is situated before the infant enters the symbolic order. It occurs as a pre-linguistic state between the "chora," which is the earliest stage of development at the age of 0-6 months, and the Lacanian "mirror stage" (Felluga).

## 3. Psychoanalytic studies of *Beloved*

Tia Byer investigates the motif of slavery in Morrison's novel. She uses a Freudian psychoanalytic lens to investigate the effects of the trauma of Sethe's infanticide on the protagonist and other characters in the novel. Byer analyzes the psyche of the characters in the light of Freud's "Pleasure Principle," according to which the mind represses

traumatic memories and replaces them with happy symbols to save a person from remembering the true pain of a horrible past experience (Byer 3). She observes that Morrison's "narrative embodies and adheres to Freud's psychic response to the unwelcome retrieval of Sethe's repressed infanticidal guilt" (Byer 3).

The representation of the trauma of slavery and how the characters deal with it in *Beloved* have been the focus of study and analysis by several writers and critics. Emma Domínguez Rué, in an essay titled "Trauma, Memory, Identity and History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," explores the idea that Sethe's identity is "constructed and reconstructed as woman, black, mother and slave by her remembrance and account of her experience to her revenant daughter," and this "painful stitching together of memories is also inscribed in Sethe's, her mother's and her daughter's body marks, a visible emblem of the past and a meaningful rewriting of herstory" (Domínguez-Rué 142). This remembrance and account of experience act as the cognitive representation of the real. The concept of the real is additionally illustrated through the recollection of an unacknowledged part of American cultural heritage. It is done through Beloved and the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter who constantly reminds Sethe about her past. Furthermore, Domínguez-Rué's analysis of Sethe's "herstory" can be linked to Byer's discussion of the traumatic, racial past which assists in constructing Sethe's identity.

In the light of everything that Sethe endures during her lifetime, P. Jeeva states that Sethe's actions, although they seem extremely violent and unacceptable at face value, can be rendered justified if her character is studied through a psychological lens. Sethe grew up in slavery without a mother around her and she understands that feeling of abandonment. Hence, whatever Sethe does, she does so to protect her children. P. Jeeva asserts that "slavery gravely harms slaves' mind-set and emotions"

and because “Sethe is the most influenced one by the past”; it can be understood why she suffers the most (P. Jeeva 75).

While Domínguez-Rué and P. Jeeva focus on the trauma that Sethe comes to counter within her life as a slave, Aubrie Cox researches the character Beloved to see how “Morrison personifies the psychological state of younger slaves,” who were “too young to have been put to work, but not too young to have suffered the atrocities of slavery” (Cox 6). Cox writes that Morrison “takes into account the relationship of Beloved with her mother, the lack of a relationship with her father, traditional cultural beliefs of unity, and normal toddler development and intricately weaves them into one person,” so as to make the readers understand how the world then was for those born into slavery (Cox 6).

Morrison’s deviations from the normalized idea of discourse used in African American fiction have been researched by Jean Wyatt. With the help of the term maternal symbolic, Wyatt uses Lacan’s psycholinguistic paradigm to highlight Morrison’s departure “from dominant language practices and from the psychological premises that underlie them”. Jean Wyatt discusses “an alternative language incorporating maternal and material values” and “a system like Lacan’s symbolic” that “locates subjects in relation to other subjects” (Wyatt 475). Wyatt perceives the character of Beloved as an infant who never grew up or entered the symbolic realm yet still craves the same love and affection from her mother as a newborn does. Because Beloved died without ever having understood the concept of death, she still holds the psyche of a child even when she is physically 19 years old. In the end, Wyatt writes: “Outcast both as victim of slavery whose death is unspeakable and as a preverbal infant who has not made her way into the symbolic order, Beloved remains outside language and therefore outside narrative memory,” leaving Sethe with the job of “invent[ing] a

language that can encompass the desperation of the slave mother who killed her daughter” (Wyatt 484).

#### **4. Analysis**

An analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* through the psychoanalytical lens can be done on the character level, on the textual level, and on a symbolic level. Freudian psychoanalytic critics examine the conscious and unconscious motives and feelings of the author or the characters by studying literary texts (Barry 74). Lacanian psychoanalytical criticism deconstructs the undercurrents of meaning which lie beneath the consciousness of the text. To analyze Morrison’s *Beloved*, one can utilize Lacanian concepts such as the mirror stage, the real, imaginary, the symbolic or desire in the analysis. A psychoanalytical criticism from Kristeva’s perspective would involve the realm of the symbolic and semiotic within the text. The former theories include Freudian and Lacanian concepts but with a semiotician, feminist and linguistic approach to language and text. In the next section, this study will employ all three perspectives of psychoanalysis to analyze the mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and her Ma’am and Sethe and her daughter, Beloved.

##### **4.1 Sethe and her mother (Ma’am)**

Sethe’s ideal I is to be the perfect maternal figure. She kills her daughter to protect her, and this guilt comes back to haunt Sethe as a ghost of her “already crawling?” (Morrison 94) daughter, Beloved. Both Sethe’s sons Buglar and Howard run away from home due to the constant horror of the ghost child living at their house on 124 Bluestone Road. Despite killing her own daughter and allowing her two sons to live in such terror that they would run away from home, Sethe’s actions in the latter part of the novel reflect her desire to please her two daughters and to be validated by them.

Sethe's childhood psychological principles and trauma shaped her identity as a mother as she witnessed her mother abandoning her at a young age by being tortured and killed. The events around Sethe's mother's death and the fact that Sethe never identifies her mother's dead body, scar Sethe for life and instill in Sethe a sense of "lack" and an abnormal feeling of maternal love where she is ready to kill her children to save them from the horror of slavery. Sethe's overprotective relationship with Denver and Beloved is the product of Ma'am's abandonment and the fact that she was never there for Sethe due to her hard slave life. Only when Sethe becomes a mother does Sethe realize that she can never allow her children go through the same traumatic events that she had experienced. Thus, the abandonment of Sethe's mother and their relationship can be analyzed through different psychoanalytical concepts.

#### **4.1.1 Freudian concepts on Sethe and her mother (Ma'am)**

Repression is a type of defense mechanism according to Freud. To analyze the former events, one could argue that Sethe has repressed the events of her mother's death, or her interactions with Nan and her mother. This is evident when Beloved asks Sethe if her mother had combed Sethe's hair just like Sethe was combing Denver's hair. Sethe, then,

... walked over to a chair, lifted a sheet and stretched it as wide as her arms would go. Then she folded, refolded and double-folded it. She took another. Neither was completely dry but the folding felt too fine to stop. She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. (Morrison 61)

Sethe remembers how she once understood the language of both Nan and her mother and how they spoke to each other. However, Sethe could no longer remember the language that was spoken in her interactions with them. Sethe could only remember the messages that both Nan and Ma'am had left her through their conversations. Sethe

remembers messages such as how her mother had thrown away her children from white crewmates who presumably had raped Ma'am. Furthermore, Sethe remembers how her Ma'am had showed her a mark that Sethe could use to identify her Ma'am's body if anything would have happened to her. Then Sethe asked Ma'am

'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.'" Sethe chuckled.

"Did she?" asked Denver.

"She slapped my face."

"What for?" "I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own."

(Morrison 61)

To understand this crucial scene, we can refer to Byer's account of the Freudian "Pleasure Principle:" the mind represses traumatic memories and replaces them with a happy symbol to save a person from traumatic experiences. Sethe's repressed memories and her forgetting of the past is an example of how the pleasure principle works. Sethe is only able to remember happier instances from her childhood as a daughter to a slave, such as singing and dancing. This is illustrated in the narrator's account of Sethe's interaction with Ma'am where Ma'am "...used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was" (Morrison 62). Morrison uses "Delayed Decoding," which is commonly used by Joseph Conrad, that is when the reader does not fully understand the extent of an event until reading the entire story (Byer 39). Ma'am's refusal to mark her daughter Sethe is a form of 'Delayed Decoding' from a psychoanalytical perspective, which acts as a tool that explains Sethe's repressed and traumatic intentions of killing Beloved to save her just as Ma'am saved Sethe.



#### **4.1.2 Lacanian concepts on Sethe and her mother (Ma'am)**

Through Lacanian concepts, Sethe's mother's hanging is construed by Sethe as an abandonment that manifests itself through Sethe's presence in the mirror stage where she recognizes herself as the "other". Additionally, this mirror-stage phase is also marked through the Lacanian "symbolic" theory where the child recognizes and utilizes language. If Sethe was able to understand and comprehend language in her interactions with Nan and her Ma'am, one could thus argue that Sethe must have left the mirror stage and entered the symbolic realm.

Furthermore, this crucial scene of "Mark me, too" and Sethe's repressed past fit the description of the Lacanian "real" where the child finds fulfilment and completeness without the need for a language. On a linguistic level, Sethe does not comprehend or understand her interactions with her mother or Nan, but Sethe does however still understand the message behind these interactions.

What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along. Holding the damp white sheets against her chest, she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (Morrison 62)

In the previous quote, the narrator refers to some meaning or message beyond language where the unspeakable is present in Sethe's life. If one considers language as a system of signs, the message Ma'am tried to convey to Sethe is a message of maternal love. Ma'am does not want to mark her baby daughter as she once was marked as a slave. Ma'am wants her daughter to have a better life and hopes that Sethe does not build her identity around the idea of slavery. In contrast, Sethe's wish to be marked like her Ma'am signifies the pre-linguistic/imaginary realm where Sethe wishes to be one with

her mother. Once Sethe is abandoned by her mother, Sethe's identity becomes similar to that of an infant who enters the mirror-stage phase. Sethe sees herself as the Other for the first time, and her journey of the split subject begins as she enters the symbolic stage of language through her interactions and conversations with Nan. From a developmental-psychological perspective, Ma'am's death represents Sethe's realization of her unattainable object of desire as she forms her own Lacanian *objet petit a*.

The concept of desire, which is the desire of fulfillment of the lack, manifests itself in Sethe's relationship with her mother and it is later projected upon Sethe's relationship with her children. Aubrie Cox accounts for the characters' unstable emotions and the psychological state of younger slaves who were "too young to have been put to work, but not too young to have suffered the atrocities of slavery" (Cox 6). In Ma'am's attempt to escape enslavement, she was also abandoning Sethe in the process. Ma'am leaves Sethe to stand facing a horrible life of enslavement. Ma'am's abandonment worsens Sethe's "Ideal I" and her attempt to be Ma'am's object of desire. One could thus argue that Sethe's unconscious behavior revolves around when Sethe was abandoned by her mother. It affects Sethe's decisions. Sethe kills her daughter Beloved because she fears losing Beloved to the venomous bondage of slavery. She prefers to kill her daughter rather than to abandon her, thus keeping her in a perpetual pre-Oedipal stage. In Saussurian, and more importantly, Lacanian terms, the signifier and signified are illustrated through Sethe's relationship with her Ma'am and between Sethe and Beloved. Ma'am's abandonment of Sethe is thus a sign of slave motherhood which Sethe refuses to re-live with her daughter Beloved. Here, Sethe ends her daughter's life in an unfortunate vicious cycle of violence that the institution of slavery triggers.

#### **4.1.3 Kristevan concepts on Sethe and her mother (Ma'am)**

Kristeva argues that the symbolic is associated with authority, order, fathers, repression and control while the semiotic is associated with disassociation with logic and order, displacement, slippage and condensation (Barry 89). These concepts are linked to the realm of the conscious and unconscious, and they surface as linguistic signifiers in the text. The unconscious part is linked to Kristeva's semiotic, and the conscious is linked to the symbolic. The symbolic creates a rift in the subject, separating it from its mother, and this allows the creation of the ego to take place. Thus, the ego and language are symbolic operations (Becker-Leckrone 163). The semiotic aspect of language is associated with the driven and unconscious logic of displacement, real/imaginary and it is also a form of language that comes before linguistic language which is related to the mother (162).

Sethe, as a child, is in the Kristevan "semiotic" realm where she also coexists as the Lacanian imaginary or the real. Kristeva argues that cries and laughter, sound and touch and gesture are pre-symbolic significations of the semiotic realm (28). These gestures are visible through Sethe's "re-memory" of her past pre-language experiences with her Ma'am and Nan. In one of Kristeva's published articles, "Place Names" (1978), she asserts that laughter is a "joy without words," that an infant shares with its mother without the necessity of words. This type of joy is demarcated in the process of realization between the self and the other in the mirror stage. This notion is noticeable through Sethe's "re-memory" of her semiotic and "asymbolic" recollection of her relationship with her Ma'am and Sethe's childhood home where Sethe does not recall any linguistic interactions, but she is able to recall semiotic aspects of her interactions and memory. This is furthermore illustrated through Sethe's "re-memory"

of Sweet Home where “she remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother” (Morrison 38).

If one considers the Kristevan semiotic as a stage that coexists with the real/imaginary and the symbolic with the Lacanian symbolic realm, the theory of “abjection,” when applied, occurs simultaneously with the entry to the mirror-stage, by the infant’s distinction between the self and the other. This notion is apparent through Sethe’s realization and distinction between herself and Ma’am through the symbol of the “mark” and as Sethe loses her mother to torture and death. One could argue that, by entering the realm of language and the symbolic, the infant loses its mother, and it would forget the semiotic which only survives in the unconscious and desire. Sethe, however, loses her mother to the horrors of slavery, which in turn shapes Sethe’s abjection and identity. Becker-Leckrone argues that abjection, similar to Freud’s repression and the unconscious’ slips, “returns in flashes, in places of strain or periods of crisis within the symbolic system” (30). Ultimately, Sethe’s semiotic is that “real,” but lost, language of her mother and that is why Sethe remembers the meaning or ‘messages’ of her interactions with her Ma’am and Nan but not the actual words or language itself.

Domínguez-Rué’s chapter on trauma, memory, identity and history, explores Sethe’s identity by considering Sethe’s past and memory and body marks as an emblem of rewriting “herstory” (Domínguez-Rué 142). This emblem of “body marks,” whether it is the tree-mark on Sethe’s back as a result of whipping or the mark on her Ma’am, acts as a reminder and abjection of Sethe’s traumatic and racial past which assists in constructing Sethe’s identity. “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house” (Morrison 15). These marks, and the haint (evil spirit), act as cognitive

representation of the semiotic real which Sethe is only able to remember through imagery and not through language.

## **4.2 Sethe and Beloved**

As an abandoned child of a tortured and a killed slave, Sethe's identity is shaped by her traumatic past. Sethe's past foreshadows, and one could argue that it justifies, Sethe's act of killing her baby-daughter Beloved. Sethe explains that "... if I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear happen to her" (Morrison 142). It is strongly indicated in the novel that Beloved is the reincarnation of Sethe's dead daughter. Beloved symbolizes the ghost of the past and slavery that comes back to haunt the present lives of Sethe, Paul D and Denver. Beloved does not have an origin and she cannot recall where she was before Sethe found her near the river bridge. Since Beloved dies while she was still a two-year-old "crawling already? girl" (103), Beloved never developed a complete understanding of language and the way it works. Her sentences are cryptic, broken, non-linear, and they exist outside the boundaries of time. *Beloved* contains a chapter of a monologue of Beloved where she mixes up events from past, present and future. Her lines lack any punctuation marks, and the sense of first-, second- or third-person pronoun is also absent while the narrative continuously shifts through flashbacks between past and present. The whole event regarding Beloved's death and resurrection back to life for Sethe is described in simple, short, and disjointed sentences put together like semiotic verses in a poem.

You forgot to smile

I loved you

You hurt me

You came back to me

You left me. (Morrison 217)

#### **4.2.1 Freudian concepts on Sethe and Beloved**

Freud's concept of "repression" is visible as Sethe no longer must repress and run away from her past unsolved conflicts or traumatic events. Sethe refuses to leave the house on 124 Bluestone Road on Paul D's suggestion because she is not ready to leave her child's ghost behind. "No more running- from nothing, I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner; it cost too much!" (Morrison 15).

The concept of sublimation, that is "repressed material ... 'promoted' into something grander" (Barry 70), plays a major part in Morrison's novel. The ghost of Sethe's dead daughter is a sign of the former concept as Sethe's defense mechanisms attempt to resolve these pasts traumatic events. Sethe's unconscious is forced to deal with Beloved as Sethe often tries to amend and make up for murdering her own daughter. Sethe is willing to do everything in her power to make up for her guilt about Beloved and re-establish her position as the great mother by fulfilling all of Beloved's desires. As a result, Sethe leaves her job, stops caring for herself, and she listens to everything Beloved shouts at her while still trying to prove herself to Beloved. "What I had to get through later I got through because of you... I walked right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you. You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here I had milk enough for all" (Morrison 198).

Sethe wants Beloved to accept that she did everything she could do in her position for her children, but Sethe never receives that ultimate validation, and she keeps trying and trying until she becomes sick. Later, Denver exits the toxic atmosphere of the house on 124 Bluestone Road where she persuades the outside world to help intervene before Sethe hurts herself. It is finally when Sethe leaves her dead daughter's

side and she joins the living again, that the ghost of Beloved stops haunting her forever (Morrison 261). P. Jeeva accounts for Sethe's traumatic past as a cause for her adult identity and Beloved's presence as an instrument for Sethe to process her past. P. Jeeva adds that Sethe "kills one of her four children to avoid her bodily and emotional fear of a life spent under slavery" (P. Jeeva 74).

#### **4.2.2 Lacanian concepts on Sethe and Beloved**

Freud's defense mechanisms of condensation and displacement correspond to "metaphor" and "metonymy". The unconscious activation of these mechanisms, argues Lacan, suggests that the unconscious mind is structured like language. Because the ghost of Beloved dies as a 2-year-old, one could then consider the Lacanian concept of the imaginary/pre-Oedipal phase where Beloved is yet to enter the symbolic world, that is the world of language. Wyatt adds that as a "preverbal infant who has not made her way into the symbolic order, Beloved remains outside language and therefore outside narrative memory" (Wyatt 484). This is manifested through Beloved's way of speaking and by expressing herself through disrupted babble, and Morrison's choice of grammatical narration when Beloved is speaking. In this imaginary stage, Sethe is Beloved's object of desire, and it is signified by how Beloved is fixated in making Sethe tell her stories about Sethe's past. It is also signified by Beloved's desire to get Sethe's complete attention. Beloved's and Sethe's bond turn into a destructive relationship. Beloved's presence obliges Sethe to take care of her as the baby-daughter she would have had.

Domínguez-Rué argues that Sethe's remembrance acts as a cognitive representation of the "real," which is illustrated through the "the recollection of an unacknowledged part of American cultural heritage" (Domínguez-Rué 141).

Furthermore, the imaginary coexists with the "real". Thus, in her psyche, Beloved left

the real and is now stuck somewhere between the imaginary and the symbolic. Her obsession with Sethe is that of an infant, and she is at a stage where she has started to realize that her mother has a completely separate identity from her and Beloved is desiring to be a part of Sethe again, i.e., fill the lack of maternal love and return to the real. In the beginning, she feels love for Sethe, then when Paul D interferes, her jealous feelings come to the surface and her obsession with Sethe grows to the point that her actions start to devour Sethe and endanger her physical and psychological health. Beloved does everything in her power to make Sethe devoted to her and her only. She stalks Sethe all day around the house, waits for her while she comes back from work and hates it when Sethe shows any care for Denver or Paul D:

Rainwater hold on to pine needles for dear life and Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe. Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindlin, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. (Morrison 57)

Beloved is not satisfied with the divided attention that she receives from Sethe. Thus, she manipulates not only Sethe but also Paul D and Denver so that she can have her mother all to herself. Beloved tells Denver that Sethe "is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (Morrison 77).

Even though the actual child Beloved was killed before her entrance to the mirror-stage, the ghost of Beloved however goes through mirror-stage aspects and experiences a sense of utter loss where Beloved realizes that she is a separate entity from the mother. Beloved realizes thus that Sethe is not this "Ideal I" and she goes on a pursuit of satisfaction because Beloved lacks her mother's desire. Beloved takes everything Sethe has and then wants more, "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (Morrison 240). What



Beloved desires is the impossible state of oneness with her mother in the imaginary. This is impossible for any child that has gone through the mirror-stage but it also impossible for Beloved because she is dead. However, by inventing desire, Beloved assumes control of desire as she projects it onto Sethe by manipulating her mother with desire. One could argue that Beloved attempts to pull Sethe into her interrupted realm of the imaginary. It is when Denver persuades the people from the community to become involved, that Sethe is saved. Beloved vanishes after Sethe tries to kill Denver's employer, Mr. Bodwin, with an ice pick thinking that he is her old master schoolteacher who has come to take her children away again. Some witnesses claim that in the last moments before disappearing, Beloved explodes. This is what she had dreamt earlier in the novel would happen if Sethe left Beloved again. At this point, her explosion also indicates that Beloved finally realizes that she can never have what she wants. Thus, her ambiguous disappearance stands symbolic for the fact that the desire just "moves on". It is never fulfilled, completed or achieved. The search for the real or the "Ideal I" is futile and after Beloved is gone, Sethe accepts her past, starts caring about Denver again and starts a new life with Paul D.

It is when Paul D arrives that Beloved comes out of the water, crawling as a ghost, and as a symbol of a reborn child. Paul D is the signifier of Beloved's separation from Sethe, as his arrival drives the ghost of baby-Beloved out of Sethe's house, forcing her to take a separate shape. Beloved needs a human shape to take up the fight for becoming one with Sethe again now that Paul D is stealing the attention. Thus, Paul D can be regarded as a signifier that wakes up the ghost of Beloved. Paul D's sexual relationship with Sethe signifies the shift of attention/desire to Paul D instead of Beloved. Beloved, stuck in the imaginary, views Paul D as a phallic rival that stands between Beloved and her mother. Beloved sees Paul D as a rival because he holds this phallic symbol or "penis". One could then argue that Beloved seeks a sexual

relationship with Paul D to fill this kind of “lack” of desire that Paul D takes away from Beloved by being Sethe’s object of desire. Beloved is indignant that Paul D is able to threaten the all-female oneness between Beloved and her mother. As a result, Beloved tries to castrate Paul D by having a sexual relationship with him.

#### **4.2.3 Kristevan concepts on Sethe and Beloved**

Kristeva’s concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic are useful in understanding Beloved’s language, and how she is narrated. Beloved’s matriarchal semiotic language is not “rule-governed,” and it shows Beloved’s inner drives and impulses through her pre-Oedipal babble, rhythm, poetic language and disruptions. Wyatt argues that Morrison’s narration for Sethe’s remembrance through messages or codes without the need for language is harnessed through the “maternal symbolic” which applies maternal and material values without the need for language (Wyatt 475). Furthermore, Sethe’s language is also that of the semiotic in its rhythmic and poetic aspect. “... but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up” (Morrison 251). The manifestation of baby Beloved through her adult self is the battle between the Kristevan semiotic and symbolic. In order for Beloved to emerge as a social being with intelligible language, the semiotic is repressed but it is still present (Arya 160). It is through Beloved’s subversion of basic rules of grammar the reader is experiencing this dynamic shift and the suppression of the symbolic. Morrison’s rendering of Beloved, through her incoherent speech and sound, expresses Beloved’s emotions and pain which language is not able to express (Arya 162). Furthermore, Morrison, amongst other postmodernist novelists, employs the concepts of the semiotic and symbolic elements of language to convey horror in literature by forcing the reader to lose bearings at the point where language and meaning break down (Arya 163).

Outside of language and textual signs, Beloved's sexual relationship with Paul D can never truly fulfill her lack of being Sethe's object of desire. Kristeva in "Women's Time" (1986) argues that the female can never truly achieve or re-experience the imaginary and the real phase. Furthermore, Kristeva argues that "A girl will never be able to reestablish this contact with her mother. A contact which the boy may possibly rediscover through his relationship with the opposite sex, except by becoming a mother herself, through a child, or through a homosexuality" (Kristeva 1986).

## **5. Conclusion**

This essay has attempted to analyze Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through a psychoanalytic lens by applying Freudian, Lacanian and Kristevan concepts. It has looked at specific events, language and expression related to the theme of motherhood. Specifically, the essay explored mother-daughter relationships between Sethe and Ma'am and between Sethe and Beloved. In addition to these characters and the bonds between them, this essay has discussed characters such as Denver, Paul D, and Nan due to their relevance to the analysis of the mother-daughter relationships in the novel.

Through a psychoanalytical lens, this essay has discussed Sethe's dealing with this "thing" of slavery and past trauma through Freudian defense mechanisms which translate into Lacanian concepts of identity. By analyzing the linguistic and textual means of the text, Julia Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and symbolic open up the realm of the act of narration as Morrison portrays *Beloved's* characters. The relationship between Sethe and her slave mother, Ma'am, mirrors Sethe's initial dealings with trauma, slavery and Sethe's formation of the "lack." The traumatic events which involve Ma'am's abandonment of Sethe and Sethe's "herstory" of slavery shape Sethe's character and her "Ideal I" as she witnessed her mother trying to escape slavery.

There is no doubt that Beloved is the ghost of Sethe's dead young daughter. Sethe killed her daughter Beloved to prevent her from living the life of a slave and to prevent Beloved from experiencing the horrible and the traumatic costs of slavery, which is similar to the experience that Sethe had to deal with when she was abandoned by her Ma'am. The Freudian analysis of the relationship between Sethe and Beloved exemplifies the concept of repressed defense mechanisms that force Sethe to deal with her past. Consequently, the repressed, manifested in the ghost of Beloved, ruins Sethe's current sense of motherhood and Sethe surrenders by giving Beloved everything that she wants. Sethe does this to make up for killing Beloved as an infant. The Lacanian analysis of this relationship shows the unconscious motifs of Sethe as a mother in relation to her daughter. Sethe's unconscious motifs are driven by Beloved where Sethe is Beloved's object of desire. Stuck in the imaginary/pre-Oedipal, and the "real," Beloved invented desire where she desires the impossible state of oneness with her mother, and she does everything in her power to obtain Sethe's devoted attention.

Lacanian psychoanalysis helps in understanding Beloved's way of speaking outside of the narrative memory where she speaks in disrupted babble and ungrammatical constructions. Focusing on Beloved as an infant who is stuck between the imaginary, Morrison's method of portraying Beloved through prelinguistic babble and baby talk is analyzed through this imaginary/real phase, but also through Kristeva's theories of abjection, semiotic and symbolic. These methods lead to an interesting narrational methodology that illustrates the "thing" of slavery and the maternal semiotic/emotions outside of language and without the need for language. The findings suggest Beloved's matriarchal semiotic language is not "rule-governed" and it uses pre-Oedipal babble, rhythm, poetic language, and interruptions to expose Beloved's inner drives and urges. Morrison's narration harnesses the "maternal symbolic," which applies maternal and material values without the use of language, for Sethe's memory of her

past interactions with Ma'am through messages or codes without the use of words This is appropriately illustrated through Sethe's 'remembrance' of her past interactions with her Ma'am and Nan through messages and code and without the need for language.

By analyzing Morrison's *Beloved* through the combined lens of Freud's, Lacan's and Kristeva's theories of psychoanalysis, it is revealed that the characters' conscious and unconscious motifs, feelings, the author's narratological methods, and language are up for interpretation through a close reading deconstruction of literary works. The analysis indicates that Sethe's relationship with her Ma'am and her past greatly affected her future life. While Sethe wanted to have a mark on her body similar to her Ma'am, Sethe's past left a mark of its own, a mark that her Ma'am refused to give her, on Sethe's future self. This mark is apparent in the literal form as results of whipping on her back in the shape of a tree, but also as a mark that has been inscribed in her unconsciousness that led Sethe to end the life of her daughter Beloved.

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