



Breaking the Myth of the Perfect Mother: A Feminist Reading of Motherhood in *Beloved* and *The Fifth Child*

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Abstract: From the beginning of human history, motherhood has been regarded as one of the most sacred and defining roles for women. Across cultures and generations, a mother has been expected to embody patience, sacrifice, compassion, and unconditional love. While social, political, and economic changes have redefined women's roles, the expectation of selfless motherhood has remained largely unchanged. With the rise of modern feminist thought, these idealized notions have been increasingly questioned, revealing the burdens and contradictions inherent in the maternal role. Literature, as a reflection of societal values, has long been a space where the complexities of motherhood are

explored, exposing the tension between expectation and reality. This paper examines the portrayal of motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, using Adrienne Rich's feminist perspective in *Of Woman Born* (1976) as a critical framework. Both novels challenge the myth of the perfect mother by presenting women who struggle under the weight of societal norms, personal trauma, and internal conflict. In *Beloved*, Sethe's desperate act of love defies conventional morality, forcing readers to confront the painful realities of maternal sacrifice. In *The Fifth Child*, Harriet's inability to conform to idealized motherhood exposes the darker side of maternal expectations. Through a feminist



lens, this study explores how these narratives dismantle traditional constructs of motherhood, offering a more nuanced and often unsettling portrait of what it means to be a mother.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Feminist Literary Criticism, Maternal Identity, Patriarchal Expectations, Toni Morrison, Beloved, Doris Lessing, The Fifth Child, Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born.*

Introduction

The politics of motherhood has long been one of the most controversial issues in literature. Throughout history, motherhood has been regarded as a sacred and constant attribute across many cultures. Despite the shifts in women's roles due to social, political, and economic changes, motherhood has persistently been considered a woman's primary responsibility.

Research and analyses reveal that in patriarchal societies, women are often viewed as the primary caregivers, and womanhood is frequently equated with motherhood (McMahon 1995; Arendell 2000). During the Industrial Revolution, women were confined to domestic spheres,

primarily responsible for child-rearing and household chores (Eyer 1996: 37). Despite its recognition as a dignified and essential duty, motherhood was idealized as an institution requiring women to be virtuous, gentle, devoted, asexual, and dedicated entirely to their families (Thurer 1994: 183).

Beyond nurturing, motherhood has also been recognized as a source of power against oppression (Collins 1994) and a challenge to political order (Ruddick 1989). British pediatrician and child psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott (1896-1971) emphasized the importance of physical care, love, and emotional intuition in motherhood. However, scholars like Arendell argue that mothering is neither a singular nor universal experience (2000: 1196). Feminist theorists highlight that motherhood imposes biological and social changes, often restricting women's autonomy. For instance, Dally (1982) asserts that societal expectations constrain women's behavior as mothers. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) contends that mothers are placed in an almost divine role due to their capacity to give life (2010: 597), a perception that further institutionalizes the concept of motherhood.



Adrienne Rich's seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) is a foundational text within feminist studies. Rich differentiates between motherhood as an institution shaped by patriarchy and motherhood as a personal experience. She argues that patriarchal systems manipulate and control motherhood, limiting women's autonomy (1995: 27). Many feminist scholars agree that motherhood can confine women to domestic roles, sacrificing their personal potential (Firestone 1993: 68). In her chapter "Anger and Tenderness," Rich critiques how patriarchal ideologies dictate women's roles, reducing their identity to biological functions. Sara Ruddick (1989) echoes this sentiment, arguing that societal expectations strip mothers of their authority and confidence.

Literature helps us understand the many sides of motherhood, showing its joys, struggles, and deeper meaning. In Doris Lessing's *To Room Nineteen* (1965), the protagonist Susan Rawlings struggles with the loss of identity after motherhood confines her to domesticity. Similarly, in *The Fifth Child* (1988), Harriet faces societal condemnation for failing to conform

to idealized maternal expectations. Both narratives highlight the oppressive aspects of institutionalized motherhood, reflecting broader feminist critiques. Ultimately, while motherhood can offer power and fulfillment, it is also shaped by societal constraints that impose limitations on women. As Rich aptly states, "As mothers, women have been idealized and exploited" (1995: 17). Feminist literature continues to explore these dualities, shedding light on the political, social, and personal dimensions of motherhood across cultures.

This paper focuses on two significant novels, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Fifth Child* by Doris Lessing, which present unconventional and challenging portrayals of motherhood. These novels question the traditional idea of a "perfect mother" and reveal the difficulties that come with raising children under extreme circumstances. In both stories, the mothers face societal judgment, internal guilt, and emotional turmoil as they navigate their roles.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison tells the story of Sethe, an enslaved woman driven by a profound maternal instinct to make an unthinkable decision in an effort to protect



her child from the horrors of slavery. Sethe's desperate act of killing her daughter rather than allowing her to live a life in bondage raises important questions about the complex nature of maternal love, personal sacrifice, and moral boundaries. Through Sethe's character, Morrison subverts the conventional image of the nurturing, selfless mother by illustrating how extreme circumstances can push a woman to unimaginable limits. The novel sheds light on the deep psychological wounds left by slavery, particularly focusing on the way it haunts enslaved mothers long after physical chains are broken.

Similarly, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* centers on Harriet, a woman who initially believes in the ideal of a harmonious family life but struggles to connect with her fifth child, Ben, whose disturbing difference alienates him from the rest of the family. Harriet's difficulty in accepting and caring for Ben challenges the socially constructed myth of unconditional maternal love. The novel explores the societal pressure imposed on women to conform to the traditional image of the devoted mother, even when they themselves feel helpless or conflicted. Harriet's character reveals the stigma and

harsh judgment faced by mothers who deviate from normative expectations.

This study intends to examine both Morrison's and Lessing's portrayal of motherhood through the lens of Adrienne Rich's feminist theory from *Of Woman Born* (1976). Rich contends that society defines motherhood in a way that often controls rather than liberates women. By applying this framework, the research will analyze how these novels confront traditional notions of the "perfect mother" and instead reveal the nuanced and often painful realities of maternal experience. Rather than presenting an idealized image of unconditional love and sacrifice, these works depict a more honest, complicated understanding of motherhood, giving voice to the silent struggles many women face and encouraging a more open conversation about the subject in both literature and society.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a seminal novel in American literature, explores the long-lasting psychological impact of slavery. Set in the post-Civil War era, the narrative follows Sethe, an African American woman who escapes the physical chains of slavery but remains psychologically tethered to its



horrors. Morrison creates a layered narrative focusing on themes of trauma, memory, and identity, with motherhood playing a central role. In the context of slavery, many enslaved women were forcibly separated from their children, their maternal rights denied by the institution itself. Thus, motherhood became a form of resistance, a way for enslaved women to assert their humanity and protect their children as best as they could.

“The novel draws inspiration from the real-life story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who fled to Ohio in 1856 with her children. When authorities closed in, she made the agonizing choice to kill her daughter rather than allow her to return to a life of slavery. Morrison weaves this historical event into Sethe’s narrative, portraying the act as both a desperate expression of love and a symptom of the trauma inflicted by slavery. Through Sethe’s experiences, *Beloved* highlights how the identity of enslaved mothers was shaped by their struggle to protect their children in a world determined to deny them agency.”

Sethe’s identity as a mother is central to the novel, shaping her decisions and sense of

self. Her determination to shield her children from the cruelties of slavery drives her to an extreme act, one that reflects both profound love and deep psychological damage. Morrison does not present motherhood as simply a nurturing role but as a powerful assertion of agency in a context where women’s autonomy was systematically stripped away. Sethe’s love is depicted as both protective and destructive, revealing the complicated reality of motherhood under slavery. Her relationship with her children is fraught with tension, where love intertwines with fear and protection blends with harm, illustrating how societal oppression distorts even the most sacred of bonds.

“Sethe’s act of infanticide goes far beyond the mere goal of ensuring physical survival. It represents a profound struggle to safeguard her children’s dignity, identity, and humanity in the face of a system designed to rob them of all three. For Sethe, motherhood is not simply about keeping her children alive; it is about protecting their very souls from being destroyed. In the context of slavery—where children were often torn from their mothers and subjected to unimaginable cruelty—Sethe’s action



becomes a radical claim to her right to determine her children's future.”

By killing Beloved, Sethe reclaims control over her children's lives, something slavery consistently denied her. Though horrifying, this act becomes her ultimate attempt to prevent the psychological and emotional devastation that slavery threatened to impose. Sethe knew the brutal realities of slavery intimately, having suffered physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and dehumanization. She also understood that under slavery, her children would be reduced to mere objects, robbed of their identity and self-worth. Believing that death was a form of salvation, she saw infanticide as an act of profound resistance—a way to preserve what little agency she had left.

Moreover, this act symbolizes Sethe's effort to regain control over not only her children's lives but her own destiny. In the grip of slavery, Sethe had no autonomy and was denied any say over her body or future. Her children were treated as commodities, bought, sold, and discarded at will. Taking Beloved's life was, in Sethe's eyes, a desperate but powerful way of asserting her right to decide their fate, even if that meant

ending their lives to save them from a greater suffering.

Sethe's infanticide emerges as a complex and morally ambiguous form of defiance. It is driven by profound love, fear of the horrors of slavery, and an intense desire to protect her children. While tragic, it also signifies Sethe's attempt to reclaim power in a world designed to deny her humanity. Morrison challenges readers to confront not only the cruelty of slavery but also the extreme lengths to which enslaved mothers went to protect their children and preserve their own dignity. Through Sethe's story, *Beloved* reveals that motherhood is not always an idealized role of unconditional love and sacrifice. Instead, it can be fraught with difficult choices, intense pain, and acts of resistance that reflect the harsh realities of a deeply unjust system.

The Burden of the “Ideal” Mother: Harriet in *The Fifth Child*

Motherhood is often idealized as the pinnacle of a woman's identity, shaped by love, care, and sacrifice. Society places immense pressure on women to be nurturing and selfless, equating maternal instincts with unconditional devotion. However, Doris



Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child* (1988) challenges this conventional portrayal by presenting a deeply unsettling depiction of motherhood through the character of Harriet Lovatt. Harriet's experience as a mother, especially in relation to her fifth child, Ben, highlights the emotional, psychological, and social burdens of the "ideal" mother.

Harriet's journey begins with an almost idyllic vision of family life. She and her husband, David, share a traditional worldview that glorifies large families and domestic stability. Their home becomes a symbol of this dream, a large house filled with warmth, children, and an ever-expanding network of relatives. Harriet, in particular, embraces the role of the devoted mother, pouring her energy into raising her children according to her strong maternal instincts. However, her idealistic vision begins to crumble with the birth of her fifth child, Ben, whose presence disrupts the family's harmony and exposes the limits of Harriet's ability to conform to the expectations of perfect motherhood.

The Arrival of Ben: A Disruptive Presence: From the moment Harriet becomes pregnant with Ben, the experience

feels different from her previous pregnancies. She endures extreme discomfort, and the baby seems unnaturally strong and aggressive, moving in a way that frightens her. Unlike her earlier experiences of pregnancy, which were joyful and fulfilling, carrying Ben feels like an ordeal. This marks the first instance where Harriet begins to sense that her experience of motherhood is not aligning with the traditional narrative of maternal bliss.

Ben's birth is another turning point. He is described as physically unusual, with a stocky build, a heavy brow, and a strangely intense presence. Unlike his siblings, who are affectionate and responsive, Ben is distant, uncommunicative, and aggressive. He bites and scratches, refuses to engage in normal childhood interactions, and even appears indifferent to human emotions. From an early age, he exhibits violent tendencies, harming animals and attacking other children.

Harriet struggles to understand Ben, but more importantly, she struggles to love him. This is where the burden of the "ideal" mother becomes painfully evident. Society dictates that a mother's love should be



unconditional, that she should be endlessly patient, and that she should see the best in her child no matter what. But Harriet is unable to do so. She finds herself repulsed by Ben's behavior and appearance, feeling a deep sense of alienation from him. Yet, she also feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility.

The Isolation of the Imperfect Mother:

One of the most striking aspects of Harriet's journey is the way she becomes isolated from her family and society. David, who initially shared Harriet's vision of an ideal family, begins to withdraw emotionally. He refuses to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and instead shifts his focus to their other children, hoping to maintain a sense of normalcy. Meanwhile, their extended family, who once celebrated their growing household, now distances themselves, treating Harriet's concerns as exaggerations.

Harriet's isolation reflects a broader societal reality—when mothers struggle, they are often blamed rather than supported. The idea that a mother might not be able to love her child is considered taboo. Society expects mothers to bear all burdens silently, to

sacrifice their well-being for the sake of their children. Harriet, however, refuses to conform entirely. She acknowledges her inability to bond with Ben in the way she does with her other children, yet she does not abandon him. Instead, she fights for him in her own way, attempting to get him the help he needs, even when doing so comes at great personal cost.

This struggle is further amplified when Harriet, in desperation, sends Ben to an institution. This decision is met with relief by her family, who hope to return to a semblance of normalcy. However, Harriet is tormented by guilt. Despite her inability to love Ben as she does her other children, she cannot bring herself to abandon him. Against the wishes of her husband and family, she retrieves Ben from the institution, bringing him back into their home. This act, though rooted in a sense of duty rather than affection, challenges the notion that maternal love must always be warm and nurturing. Harriet's love for Ben is not traditional, but it is real—it is a love born out of obligation, guilt, and an unbreakable bond between mother and child.



The Fracturing of Family and Identity

Harriet's decision to bring Ben home ultimately leads to the disintegration of her family. Her other children feel neglected, and David grows increasingly distant. The ideal home she once envisioned now becomes a place of tension and unhappiness. Harriet finds herself trapped—unable to fully embrace Ben, yet unable to reject him either. She is caught between societal expectations of motherhood and her own painful reality. Lessing's portrayal of Harriet highlights a critical feminist critique of the way motherhood is idealized. Harriet's suffering stems not just from her personal struggles but from the rigid societal norms that refuse to acknowledge the complexity of motherhood. In a world that glorifies maternal sacrifice, Harriet's inability to love Ben in the "right" way marks her as a failure. But is she truly a failure, or is she simply a woman forced into an impossible situation?

Lessing does not provide easy answers. Instead, she forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that not all mothers experience the same kind of love for all their children, and that the pressures placed on

women to be perfect mothers can be deeply damaging. Harriet's story is a painful reminder that motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all experience. It is messy, unpredictable, and, at times, heartbreaking.

Through Harriet's character in *The Fifth Child*, Lessing dismantles the myth of the perfect mother, exposing the emotional and psychological burdens that come with trying to live up to impossible expectations. Harriet's experience challenges the traditional notion that a mother must always be nurturing and self-sacrificing, instead presenting a more realistic, albeit painful, portrayal of motherhood. Her journey is not one of triumph, nor is it one of total failure—it is simply the story of a woman trying to navigate the overwhelming responsibilities of being a mother, while grappling with feelings of love, guilt, resentment, and obligation.



Conclusion

The idea of a “perfect mother” is often an unrealistic expectation forced on women. Both *Beloved* and *The Fifth Child* challenge this myth by showing the struggles, fears, and difficult choices that mothers face. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* explores how slavery destroyed the natural bond between mothers and children, forcing women like Sethe to make unimaginable decisions. Sethe’s love is powerful, but it is also shaped by trauma, proving that motherhood is not always gentle or nurturing—it can be desperate and painful. Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* presents a different but equally challenging view of motherhood. Harriet starts as an ideal mother but is judged harshly when she struggles to love and control her difficult child. The novel questions whether a mother must always sacrifice her own happiness to meet society’s expectations. Both stories prove that motherhood is not always about joy and fulfillment—it can also involve loss, fear, and isolation. These books help us understand that mothers are human, not perfect figures of endless love and patience. By breaking the myth of the perfect mother, Morrison and Lessing allow us to see

motherhood in a more honest and meaningful way.

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