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**MATERNAL LOVE UNDER SIEGE: A PSYCHOSOCIAL
READING OF POVERTY AND SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S
*BELOVED***

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Abstract

*This article examines the mother-daughter relationship amidst poverty in the context of slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It studies how this relationship reflects such a natural connection between mother and daughter that is often complicated, so that hardly anyone understands the hidden secrets between them. Thus, considering the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship, the study uses Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory to illustrate how Morrison portrays the negative impact of racism and slavery on this relationship in *Beloved*. In doing so, the article examines the various ways the novel depicts the psychosocial connection between mother and daughter by illustrating how the mind triggers certain human actions and inactions. While previous studies on this text dwelt on the effect of slavery and the concept of absentee fathers in African American literature, this article demonstrates how Morrison's socio-political ideology influences her perception and presentation of psychosocial reality. The findings of the study reveal that, like other contemporary African American literary works, Morrison's novel addresses issues associated with the psychosocial relationship between parents and children in the context of racism, slavery and general disillusionment. Therefore, the study concludes that Morrison's acquired ideology in the context of identity crises, racism, slavery and their resultant exploitation and oppression influences her perception and presentation of psychosocial reality.*

Keywords: Psychology, Poverty, Slavery, Morrison, Maternal Love

Introduction

This paper examines Toni Morrison's portrayal of the psychosocial consequences of slavery and poverty on the mother-daughter relationship in *Beloved* through the prism of Erikson's Psychosocial theory. Erikson argues that social experiences continuously shape who we are as we navigate eight distinct stages of identity formation. Therefore, the mother-child connection is an inherent manifestation of a warm and emotional relationship that develops over time (regardless of the child's gender); however, the intimate connection between a mother and her daughter is hardly emphasised due to their shared gender – a biological factor which guarantees certain social proximity that is rarely possible between a mother and son. Diane et al. (2023) believe that the mother-daughter relationship is a complicated one because they tend to be so attached that hardly anyone knows much about their secrets, even though such heartfelt attachment could often lead not only to love, passion and compassion, but also anger, guilt and regret due to natural human misconceptions and selfishness. Similarly, Hasseldine (2006) opines that mother-daughter intimacy is an interesting and precious relationship, even though misunderstandings sometimes occur, to the point that the bond deteriorates to the extent that the sight of each other becomes uncomfortable; however, they eventually settle their differences and quickly form a caring support network.

The relationship between mothers and daughters has long been recognised as one of the most complex and influential bonds within the family structure. This relationship is central to shaping identity, emotional development, and social orientation, particularly in women. In literary studies, the mother-daughter relationship often serves as a symbolic and practical site where cultural values, gender expectations, and psychological conflicts are negotiated. In African American literature, this bond becomes even more layered, intersecting with historical trauma, racial oppression, and socio-economic struggles that complicate familial intimacy.

Morrison's *Beloved* therefore probes the psychological and social dimensions of mother-daughter ties within a context shaped by slavery, racism, patriarchy, and cultural dislocation. *Beloved* reveals that the mother-daughter bond is not only personal but also political—deeply entangled with systemic structures that shape Black women's lives across generations. In line with this, the mother-daughter relationship has been a central focus of feminist, psychoanalytic, and sociological discourse due to its formative influence on women's identity and socialisation. Chodorow (1978) underscores that the mother-daughter bond plays a pivotal role in shaping female subjectivity, as daughters often internalise their mothers' roles, emotions, and expectations. From a psychosocial perspective, this relationship not only affects individual psychological development but also reflects broader cultural, racial, and socioeconomic structures. As Hirsch (1989) argues, literary representations of mothers and daughters often dramatise both the intimacy and tensions inherent in this bond, providing a lens into how personal identities intersect with history and culture.

In African American literature, the mother-daughter relationship takes on unique significance, reflecting the historical realities of slavery, systemic racism, and the persistent marginalisation of Black women. Collins (1991) emphasises the cultural centrality of motherhood in African American communities, noting that mothering can function as both an act of survival and resistance within oppressive systems. Consequently, the African American mother-daughter bond is often fraught with contradictions: nurturing yet demanding, protective yet sometimes emotionally distant, shaped by the pressures of survival and the scars of historical trauma.

A contextual psychosocial reading of this novel reveals that Morrison's mother-daughter narratives are not merely interpersonal but deeply political. They embody the intersection of psychology and society: trauma, self-concept, and emotional attachment are bound up with racism, sexism, poverty, and cultural displacement. By placing mothers and daughters at the heart of her novels, Morrison

illuminates the generational transmission of trauma while also celebrating the resilience and survival strategies of Black women.

This research, therefore, presents the background as well as related literature to the study in order to locate the gap of the study. Psychosocial theory presents the framework through which the text is read, leading ultimately to the conclusion of the research findings.

Review of Related Literature

Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is in a league of its own as a masterpiece in African American literature. Consequently, the novel has generated critical responses from scholars. Some scholars review this novel through the prism of historical foundation, trauma and re-memory; others look at it through the binoculars of the individual psyche, supernatural embodiment, community and healing perspective. While all these perspectives are tenable in the ongoing attempt at praxis, more needs to be done on the mother-daughter relationship.

Spillers (1987) provides a significant theoretical perspective for understanding Morrison's *Beloved*, arguing that slavery reduced enslaved Africans to "flesh," stripping them of legal personhood, gendered identity, and stable family relationships while denying Black women authority over their own bodies and children. She further explains that the instituting of slavery disrupted black motherhood and kinship through violence, commodification, and forced separation. Morrison's *Beloved* reflect these realities through Sethe, whose traumatic experiences under slavery shape her understanding of motherhood and ultimately lead to a desperate attempt to protect her children from re-enslavement. The novel also portrays the enduring psychological and generational effects of slavery through characters like Beloved and Denver, illustrating Spiller's argument that the legacy of slavery extends beyond physical emancipation. Consequently, Spiller's work provides an important framework for interpreting Morrison's exploration of black motherhood, identity, memory and the lasting trauma of enslavement.

For instance, Angela (1994) examines Morrison's *Beloved* from the perspective of master-slave narrative by speaking about two "unspeakable things unspoken" in the bulk of American literature and hitherto marginalised in American history: the horror of the Middle Passage and the horror of slavery. Consequently, the novel confronts the horror of the Middle Passage, "the voyage of death as Hayden calls it. This article therefore places priority on the historical background of the transatlantic slave trade while neglecting the importance of the mother-daughter relationship.

Besides, Terzieva (2004) believes that the novel is a key text that throws light upon liminal psychic experiences by using psychoanalysis and especially Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, as well as the narratological approach of Bakhtin. For him, Morrison deals with the problem of human survival on two levels, thus bridging the gap between historical narrative and personal history. By applying psychoanalytic theory to his discourse, the critic believes that the actions and inactions of the major characters are informed by deep-seated trauma buried in the subconscious.

Similarly, Lakshmi (2017) dwells on the horrors of slavery in explicit detail, elaborating upon the physical and mental abuses suffered by Sethe, Paul D, and the other Sweet Home slaves. To him, *Beloved* not only speaks for the slaves whose voices were silenced, but also contributes to Morrison's critique of the aesthetics that has dominated American culture and its canon of literature: the preponderance of male central characters. Consequently, Morrison places female characters at the center of her narration and also gives them roles that are supposedly masculine.

Conversely, Wyatt (2020) opines that Morrison's textual practice challenges Lacan's assumptions about language and language users, and her depiction of a social order that performs some of the functions of mothering challenges his vision of a paternal symbolic order based on a repudiation of maternal conviction.

Qayoom (2002) views Morrison's *Beloved* from the perspective of the intersectionality of memory, trauma and resistance. The article explores a complex and convoluted traumatic web of memories to look into how the process of memory-making can be a disastrous and traumatic act for the major characters.

Bolla and Konda (2023), in a rather simplistic oeuvre examines the novel's themes, literary technique and historical context. They also discuss the novel's portrayal of slavery, motherhood and memory while neglecting the important bond that exists between the female central characters and their daughters.

From this plethora of literature, it is evidently clear that little attention has been given to the psychosocial relationship that exists between the central characters and their daughters in an environment where poverty is rife. Consequently, this paper explores *Beloved* from that lens.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The study applies Psychosocial theory as a critical theoretical approach to highlight how Morrison's novel depicts women's psychosocial condition under trauma associated with physical violence, exploitation and psychological subjugation. Afro-American women, who are perceived as inferior and subordinate due to their gender and race in a class society, are susceptible to sexual exploitation and psychological trauma that becomes a causal factor in emotional and life-threatening actions.

The psychosocial approach looks at individuals in the context of the combined influence that psychological factors and the surrounding social environment have on their physical and mental wellness and their ability to function. This approach is used in professions like health and social care settings as well as by medical and social science researchers (Woodward, 2015). The relationship between mental and emotional well-being and the environment was first commonly applied by Erik Erikson in his description of the stages of psychosocial development. Mary Richmond (1940) considers this a strictly causal relationship in the diagnostic process. In 1941, Gordon Hamilton renamed the existing (1917) concept of "social diagnosis" as "psychosocial study."

The very definition of who is a mother can be contentious. Due to technological and legal changes, there is more and more variation among mothers with respect to age, marital status, and sexual orientation. Adoption has long shown that social motherhood is not contingent on giving birth, and surrogacy and in vitro fertilisation now create a possible distinction between the gestational mother and the genetic mother (Hrды, 1999). The very process of conception, pregnancy, and birthing has undergone many transitions, with much greater involvement of medical professionals. The meanings associated with motherhood and motherhood practices vary across historical, sociocultural, and political contexts. Despite the great variation, even within specific countries at one point in time, in the practices of motherhood, discourses about what exactly constitutes "good" mothering and who should and should not mother exist. Those at the "frontier" of motherhood, such as queer mothers, continue to shape and reshape the very concept of motherhood and mothering. For many mothers, this means they are caught between cultural expectations about how to mother and the realities of their everyday lives, such as breastfeeding practices and childcare arrangements (Hrды, 1999). Although rates of mothers' labour-force participation are high or increasing in many countries, mothers still face the primary burden of arranging, managing, and even financing childcare solutions for their children; work-family conflict remains a problem for mothers, much more so than for fathers. Allen (2006) claims that policies designed to ease the conflict between employment and motherhood, both those implemented by governments and those created by employers, vary greatly across countries, thereby re-emphasising the context-dependent meaning of motherhood in women's lives.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory (1950) is an example of a theory of typical development that can help generate hypotheses and interpret research findings on the transition to adulthood for individuals with ASD and their families. In this theory of personality, Erikson proposed eight stages of human development starting in infancy and extending into old age. Each stage focuses on becoming competent in an area of life and is characterised by a developmental "crisis" or conflict. Before the individual moves on to the next stage of development, the previous conflict must be resolved on a spectrum ranging from positive to negative. A positive resolution indicates that the person has acquired the competency for that stage, whereas a negative resolution occurs when the individual fails to develop it. The way a crisis is resolved at each developmental stage is important not only to that stage but also to all subsequent stages, as each competency builds on those from earlier stages. That is, a negative resolution at one stage will make it much more difficult to resolve the crisis positively at a subsequent stage.

For the current discussion, two of Erikson's psychosocial stages are most relevant. The first is "identity versus identity confusion," which takes place during adolescence. As adolescents explore their independence and develop their sense of self, they begin to ask questions such as "Who am I, and what is my place in the world?" When this personal exploration is appropriately encouraged and reinforced, adolescents can choose their values and vocational goals and develop a lasting personal identity. Developing a set of personal values and an independent identity allows adolescents to know where they fit into society and to move into adulthood and the next stage of development with confidence. According to Erikson (1968), failure to develop an identity leads to confusion and insecurity about future adult roles and to difficulty in successfully resolving future adult stages.

The second relevant psychosocial stage is "intimacy versus isolation," which Erikson (1964) proposed as the major stage of early adulthood. Erikson believed that early adulthood was the time when people began exploring intimate relationships with those outside their families of origin, and that developing close, committed relationships with such others was vital to optimal psychosocial development. Those who successfully resolve this phase develop committed, secure relationships, whereas those who are unsuccessful will experience isolation and loneliness. Keeping in mind that the resolution of each stage depends on the previous one, Erikson believed that young adults who failed to develop a personal identity during adolescence would have difficulty forming intimate relationships in young adulthood.

Basic Assumptions of Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory is one of the newer Psychoanalytic approaches applied to literary studies. According to Mambrol (2021), Erikson's Psychosocial Theory can serve as a viable critical tool for analysing literary texts, including prose fiction, drama, and poetry. The theory is built on certain basic tenets, such as the assumptions that:

- i. Understanding the psychosocial stages can help analyse characters' development, motivations, and conflicts.
- ii. Themes and symbolism: The theory can shed light on themes related to identity, autonomy, and relationships in literary works.
- iii. Authorial insight: Knowing Erikson's stages can provide insight into authors' portrayals of human development and experiences.
- iv. The theory can inform readers' interpretations of characters and their psychological journeys. The study, therefore, deploys some of the tenets outlined above as poetics for interpreting Morrison's *Beloved*, illustrating the portrayal of psychosocial issues in the mother-daughter relationship in the context of racism, poverty, fear, tension, and apprehension.

Poverty and Identity Formation in Morrison's *Beloved*

The inherent connections between poverty and identity formation pervade the world of the novel. The novel shows the intersections of race, gender, and class, revealing how systemic oppression shapes

mother-daughter relationships. Morrison situates mother-daughter relationships within the harsh context of poverty. Poverty is not merely a backdrop but a structural force that fractures intimacy, distorts maternal love, and compels women into choices that seem paradoxical—acts of care that inflict pain. However, daughters do not respond uniformly to these legacies. The novel shows Denver turning deprivation into resilience and communal survival. The novel demonstrates that poverty reshapes mother-daughter bonds in ways that are at once destructive and transformative.

Ultimately, Morrison refuses sentimental visions of motherhood. She exposes how structural poverty fractures love, passes emotional scarcity across generations, and leaves both mothers and children wounded. However, she also suggests possibilities of resistance: Sethe's desperate refusal to commodify her child, Suggs's call to self-love, and Denver's turn toward community all gesture toward healing when conditions change. Morrison's work thus demands an ethical reading of motherhood that acknowledges deprivation as a causal factor, reminding us that poverty does not erase love but warps it into forms that are at once protective, destructive, and profoundly human.

Furthermore, Morrison demonstrates how poverty deforms maternal love, compelling mothers into acts of violence and shaping daughters' lives in profound ways. However, the novel diverges in how daughters respond: Denver transforms deprivation into independence and community survival, while Baby Suggs converts it into alienation and radical individuality. Morrison's vision reveals that poverty is not only a material condition but also a psychic inheritance that penetrates the most intimate of bonds. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the legacies of maternal poverty may yield resilience or rebellion, but never leave daughters untouched.

Motherhood, Imagery and Symbolism in *Beloved*

Morrison's literary imagination has persistently returned to the intertwined questions of family, community, and motherhood within the African American experience. Morrison reconstructs motherhood not merely as a biological role but as a spiritual, historical, and political site of identity formation. Through her depictions of Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver, Morrison interrogates the conventional ideals of maternal love, exposing the violent social conditions that distort familial relationships under slavery and systemic racism. The family bond, in Morrison's world, is never a private or sentimental enclosure but a battleground on which Black women assert, negotiate, and sometimes lose their personhood.

In this novel, Morrison dramatises the way slavery annihilates the possibility of stable family bonds, thereby compelling the mother's love into morally ambiguous terrain. Sethe's act of infanticide—killing her baby daughter rather than allowing her to be returned to slavery—has provoked extensive critical debate about maternal agency. Morrison situates Sethe's decision within a continuum of historical trauma, transforming what might appear as madness or moral transgression into an assertion of ownership over her children's humanity. As Hirsch (1989) argues, Morrison “forces readers to confront the extremity of maternal love in a world where the mother's body is both weapon and property” (p. 293). Sethe's violent protection of her child challenges both the sentimental ideal of motherhood and the political dehumanisation that renders the slave mother's children legal property. Sethe's claim that “I took and put my babies where they would be safe” (Morrison, 1987, p. 193) demonstrates a radical redefinition of maternal protection. The horror of infanticide becomes a paradoxical act of reclamation—a refusal to let the oppressor possess what was born of her flesh. In this sense, the act is not simply one of despair but of moral resistance. As O'Reilly (2004) notes, Morrison “turns the maternal act into a counter-discourse of survival, wherein motherhood reclaims agency from the institution of slavery” (p. 56). The milk imagery that pervades the novel reinforces this theme: Sethe's anguish over the theft of her milk symbolises the violation of maternal sovereignty. To have her milk stolen by white men is to be stripped of her most intimate function—to nourish, to sustain, to define herself through giving life.

The motif of milk, then, functions as both a bodily and spiritual emblem of family connection. When Sethe recalls, “They held me down and took my milk,” she is mourning not only physical violation but the theft of her motherhood itself (Morrison, 1987, p. 19). The physical act becomes a metaphor for slavery’s broader project—the systematic dismemberment of familial and communal continuity. As Baby Suggs preaches to the ex-slaves at the Clearing, the reclamation of the body (“love your hands! love your heart!”) becomes the foundation for reconstituting self and family. Motherhood in *Beloved* thus extends beyond biological reproduction; it becomes an act of spiritual reconstruction, a means by which Black women assert humanity in a world that has declared them less than human.

Poverty as Distortion of Maternal Love

Morrison portrays mothers whose love is filtered through economic and social deprivation, producing acts of violence as desperate forms of protection. In *Beloved*, Sethe kills her infant daughter rather than let her be enslaved, explaining to Paul D, “I took and put my babies where they would be safe” (p. 193). Enslavement, as a form of extreme poverty, narrows maternal choices to life or death, turning nurturing into destruction. Morrison shows that poverty—both material deprivation and the moral/spiritual impoverishment of slavery—warps maternal love in *Beloved*: it forces mothers into choices that look like cruelty or self-destruction but emerge from a context that makes ordinary loving options impossible. The novel insists that to understand Sethe’s (and other women’s) acts, we must read them as responses to structural deprivation rather than simple moral failure (p. 43).

Below is an evidence-based reading framed around four moves Morrison makes: (a) poverty as literal scarcity that limits maternal options, (b) poverty as commodification of bodies and children, (c) poverty’s psychic/spiritual impoverishment that distorts attachment and memory, and (d) the novel’s ethical plea to read maternal acts in context. Morrison repeatedly places mothering against a backdrop of stark material lack: food, shelter, legal protection, and autonomy. The novel’s opening and many scenes remind us that the household economy of formerly enslaved people is precarious—running on scraps, favours, and constant fear. That scarcity shapes what mothering can be. Sethe’s infamous act (killing her child rather than letting the child be taken into slavery) must be read in the context of the options available to her. There was no legal protection, no remedy, no realistic hope that her children could grow up free and safe. Morrison frames Sethe’s decision as born of deprivation of alternatives rather than as a private pathology (p. 73). When Baby Suggs preaches in the “Clearing”, she exhorts people to “love” their bodies, implying that under slavery, material deprivation made such self-regard difficult: the body was property. The absence of basic material and social conditions becomes “the stage on which maternal love is tested and often broken” (p. 96).

Morrison depicts how slavery converted ties of kinship into economic transactions; that commodification is a form of poverty (loss of kin’s autonomy, love turned into economic value). Scenes and backstory repeatedly depict children being sold, bargained for, or repossessed. In that system, a mother’s love collides with the fact that her child can literally be taken as capital. Love therefore becomes an emergency act: either attempt to protect the child by flight (rarely possible), or resist in a way that the market/society cannot commodify—Sethe’s final refusal to allow the baby to be enslaved is an attempt to reverse commodification through an act that, to outsiders, reads as violence. Morrison forces readers to see the act as what it is in that economic logic: a response to “the child’s impending reduction to property” (p. 64).

Beyond scarcity and commodification, Morrison depicts poverty as an inner, spiritual impoverishment produced by slavery and persistent marginalisation. That interior state reshapes maternal affect and memory. Memories in the text are fragmented, suppressed, and haunted. Sethe’s maternal identity is bound up with traumatic memory (the “necklace of hair,” the scarred back, the tree-shaped scar on her breast). Trauma interrupts straightforward loving behaviour; it creates hypervigilance, exaggerated protectiveness, and at times paralysis. Morrison shows how poverty of spirit—alienation, shame, and the internalisation of “the slaveholder’s gaze”—makes maternal love

complicated and sometimes lurching into acts that look monstrous to those who do not feel the deprivation (p. 87). The character of *Beloved* literalises the return of the past. Her presence forces Sethe and Denver to confront how poverty (material and psychic) has hollowed out their capacity for ordinary nurturing relationships. *Beloved*'s demands for attention and sustenance physically drain Sethe—Morrison links emotional impoverishment to literal exhaustion and neglect.

Morrison presents multiple incidents in which “maternal love” takes shape in response to a lack. Breastfeeding and food: Mothers in the novel often feed their children at a personal cost. When resources are meagre, the mother's body is the last reservoir. Morrison uses feeding imagery to show both sacrificial love and the self-destructive effects of scarcity on motherhood. Hiding and lies: To protect children, mothers lie, steal, or hide—moves that are criminalised or judged by outsiders. Because the legal and economic order offers no safe channels, maternal love becomes clandestine and morally ambiguous. Community's role (or failure): The community's abandonment or inability to protect mothers is part of the poverty that distorts maternal actions. Even with community bonds (Baby Suggs' ministry, Denver's relationship to Sixo's memory), “the institutionalised deprivation is not erased; Morrison thus implicates the wider social order” (p. 120). Morrison does not give a single, authoritative moral judgment; instead, she uses Free indirect discourse, fragmented scenes, and multiple points of view so readers experience how poverty narrows choices. The book refuses the comforts of simple condemnation. Recurrent motifs—food, house (p. 124), the ghost, the scar—to keep linking physical lack to emotional consequences. For example, the house, “124,” is at once “haunted and materially impoverished; the ghost's presence symbolises unprocessed grief tied to economic and social deprivation” (p. 171). Morrison not only depicts distortion; she also shows maternal love as a source of resistance. Sethe's act, while horrific on the surface, is portrayed as an ultimate refusal to hand a child over to enslavement; it is an assertion of agency under conditions that normally strip agency away. Morrison asks readers to see this as a form of desperate defence—love reshaped by resistance (p. 64). Suggs's insistence on self-love for the body, and Denver's eventual movement toward social connection, show that maternal love and care can be reclaimed, restructured, and healed when material conditions and communal ties change.

Morrison demands we judge acts in their contexts. The novel functions as an ethical corrective: it compels readers to account for structural causes (slavery, poverty, racism) before condemning mothers whose acts are shaped by those forces. To read Sethe only as a murderer is to ignore the economic and moral landscape that made murder seem, to her, preferable to a life of commodified childhood. Morrison thus reframes maternal failure as a social indictment: poverty (broadly conceived) is the force that twists love into something we struggle to name. Opening line: “123 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom.” This compresses how the domestic space, “where maternal love is supposed to be safe—is itself corrupted and haunted by the legacy of deprivation and loss (p. 211). On Sethe's conviction: Morrison repeatedly returns to the logic that the slave system's lack of humane options is causally prior to Sethe's act; the narrative makes “the moral scene ambiguous rather than black-and-white” (p. 91).

Poverty in the novel is not merely a lack of things; it is the systemic removal of possibilities for ordinary love. Morrison shows how material scarcity, commodification of bodies, and psychic impoverishment produced by slavery distort maternal love into acts that are at once attempts at protection and outcomes of social violence. Reading Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver sympathetically requires attending to that structural violence; Morrison's novel insists that the ethics of motherhood in the aftermath of slavery cannot be separated from the political economy that shaped it.

Consequences of Poverty on Mother-Daughter Bonds

The novel *Beloved*, for instance, portrays poverty not merely as a lack of material resources but as something deeply intertwined with the psychological, social, and moral aftermaths of slavery. The novel suggests that poverty remains a legacy of enslavement, shaping identity, relationships, and the capacity

for freedom in complex ways. One of the most immediate consequences of poverty in *Beloved* is the insecurity of basic needs—shelter, food, and physical security. Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs live in 124 Bluestone Road, a house in disrepair that becomes symbolic of both haunted pasts and economic constraints.

Conclusion

Taken over all, through the prism of Erikson’s Psychosocial theory, the article shows how the material condition of slavery affects the mother-daughter relationship in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Hence, the end of slavery did not mark the end of its material and psychological costs. Through the lives of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, Morrison shows how poverty and social abjection inherited from slavery continue to shape family connection, identity and survival in the post-emancipation period. The mother-daughter idealised bonds are contested spaces where love is tested by deprivation, trauma and the impossibility of forgetting. Poverty in *Beloved* aggravates psychological trauma. The absence of material security forces characters to constantly look back, leaving them unable to plan for or hope for the future fully. Sethe’s brain is described as “not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (p. 13). This quote shows how poverty—tied to past traumas—limits emotional bandwidth, making forward progress difficult. The cost of freedom, in this psychological sense, is not just escaping physical enslavement but the hard work of self-possession and mental reclamation. For example, the quote “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 95) emphasises that poverty and its effects extend beyond financial lack to the struggle for autonomy, dignity, and self-concept.

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