

The Meanings of Home as Institution in  
Toni Morrison's "*Beloved*" and  
Sono Ayako's "*The False Family*"

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All the time, no matter what they were doing... all the time  
the three shadows that shot out of their feet to the left held hands.  
Nobody noticed but Sethe and she stopped looking after she  
decided that it was a good sign. A life. Could be.

*Beloved* (56)<sup>1</sup>

In the Kure family, only because you are a woman, you shall  
not be regarded as a human being.

*The False Family* (93)<sup>2</sup>

I

It is true that the best socializing institution is "home." That's why every government in the old times had made use of this institution to guide its people in the way that they would cooperate with the regime, thus keeping every home under the guardianship of the government in all aspects of economics, politics, and even in philosophy. In the case of Sethe, a heroine of *Beloved*, it was slavery that confined her in its institution, while Masako, a heroine of *The False Family*, was captured in its old Confucian traditionalism which has been observed as the basic philosophy ever since Tokugawa Shogunate era. These women, however, played substantial roles in their home as a mother; one in slavery in America, the other in Feudalistic traditional society in Japan. They struggled hard in vain against their sexual and/or racial repressions only to realize their inability and weakness in their patriarchal society.

Here in this paper, the author, focusing on their home as institution with his critical feminism eyes, tried to explore how much their home as institution had affected Sethe (in *Beloved*) and Masako (in *The False Family*). The author also wants to claim how much they were attracted to their home, though they suffered much, even sacrificed themselves in acting the role of mother; Sethe had actually almost given up her life for

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the sake of her family, while Masako, too, had to hand off any of her personal will and hope in her home, let alone her mothering and motherhood.

## II

As my title denotes, this is a comparative study of the meanings of home in these two novels; Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sono Ayako's *The False Family*. To begin with, we have several types of institutions in our society, but "home" is the oldest and most common human institution, and in those two novels the meanings of home is specifically significant both to Sethe and Masako because they were both mothers with their children to raise. In any society West or East it is the home that is the center of family activities through which our children learn basic skills, such as how to talk and how to get along with others. Of course our social conditions, laws, and traditions are all important in terms of socio-political environment in which we live and to which our behavior and family patterns are definitely conformed. Moreover, we all know that "home" is not only the best socializing institution but also the site in which many of the emotions that make us most fully human are fostered and nurtured.

From this point of view, we have no doubt that our heroines, Sethe and Masako should have been given the most important role in their homes; in other words, they were the central persons as mothers in their home. Thus these two women certainly shared some similar responsibilities in terms of mothering, despite the great difference of their cultural and social norms in which they had to bring up their children. One instance I can depict is that both of them were more or less confined and restrained by their home as an institution. Sethe was, in a sense, a woman captive in the institution of slavery as much as in the institution of home, while Masako was another woman captive in the institution of the old traditional home, which denied any women's rights including personal aspires, having identities, and even mothering.

## III

We know that American society favors, if not cares for, the individual rather than the family, but no one can deny, I presume, that peace in the home contributes to peace in the society just as the good home sustains the good society. Our protagonists, both Sethe and Masako made hard efforts to establish peace in their homes, enduring tremendous social oppressions and discriminations; Sethe bravely struggled over racial discriminations in her community, while Masako also did against gender discriminations as woman in spiritual isolation within her family. But at the end of their long fights putting up with those oppressions, what was bestowed upon them as their rewards was disintegration of their families.

What was it then that crushed their zealous and hopeful endeavors to establish

peace in their home? What prevented them from keeping their families together and living together in their own home? In the case of Sethe it was slavery as institution that crushed her home and dream; she could not claim for peace in her family because she was a slave. As for Masako, it was a traditional Japanese home as institution that prevented her from establishing a warm-hearted family because she was a woman. Contrary to her dream, she had to sacrifice herself for her family in which she felt no family-love, no mutual dependency, nor basic trust, because her family was a false family which was not worthy her efforts.

#### IV

*The False Family*, which I chose for this paper, was published in 1973, when the hottest social issue in Japanese communities was the problem of fanatical enthusiasm for higher education among people because high educational background promised them high social prestige and privilege in the future. Therefore every family pushed their sons to work hard, even from the kindergarten, so that their sons could enter a higher prestigious university.

Our heroine Masako was introduced as a happy housewife. Her husband, Mr. Kure was a professor of a famous university in Tokyo and she had two children; one was a daughter, a student of a prestigious private girl high school and the other was an intelligent son whose academic qualification was high enough to be eligible for Tokyo University, the best institute in Japan. So Masako was envied, if not respected, by all her neighbors. Naturally the Kure family passed as a most distinguished one in the community.

However the truth was quite opposite; their family was far from being happy. Masako was regarded merely as a housemaid in the Kure family; she was not a wife, not even a mother, but a housewife with no identity, being isolated and discriminated against by her family. Her husband, so arrogant and brutal, frequently hit her for any reason; for example, the water in the bathtub wasn't hot enough for him, or the soup at dinner wasn't warm enough, and so on. In order to avoid his fitful violence Masako accustomed herself to apologize first whenever she was addressed to by her husband, "Oh, forgive me. I was wrong. I was so wrong." Actually she hadn't done anything wrong to him. When she came across her old friend while she was shopping, Masako unconsciously uttered the phrase, "Oh please forgive me. I was wrong." Without any doubt this phrase she uttered did shock her friend. "Why, Masako, what do you apologize for? You are not doing anything wrong." ( 55 ) cried her friend, but Masako didn't say anything. She just didn't know what to reply. It was already her habitual reaction. She was always so afraid of disgracing the fame of the Kure family if she

would say anything.

Moreover, Masako was deprived of her right of mothering. Her husband never allowed her to bring up her son in the way she wanted, but in the way he ordered: he wanted his son to be strong-willed and cold-hearted enough to beat his classmates in school works. It was hardly his concern if his son were warm-hearted and sympathetic. When his daughter, Kiyoko, brought her fiancée to her father, he got furiously mad at her and refused seeing him. Mr. Kure, after having known her fiancée's job as a construction worker, started accusing him of his poor academic background and scorned him. Her father's philosophy was that a man was nothing but trash unless he had a high educational background.

As Kiyoko confessed to her fiancée, she and her mother were never allowed to join in the conversation of her father and her brother. They were totally ignored and despised because they were women. Kiyoko sadly said, "If you are a woman, and only because you are a woman, you won't be treated as a human being in the Kures family." (93)

Eventually tragedy assaulted Masako on the day when Hiroyuki was accepted to Tokyo University. It was a rainy cold night and Masako had been seriously ill in bed. Hiroyuki coming back home very late at night demanded that his mother should go out and buy him a bottle of cider because he was thirsty. Masako didn't refuse her son's order but went out into the dark rainy night even though she was in a critically feverish condition. On her way back she was run over by a car: in the sea of blood, according to the report of the police, she was still holding the bottle of cider for her son. At the funeral of her mother, Kiyoko inquired Hiroyuki if he didn't think it so horrible to ask Mama to go out, because he must have known that Mother was seriously ill then. But his reply was as cold as ice; he shouted, "No, Mother was wrong. It is an obvious matter to follow my order. Father always tells me so." (378) Kiyoko felt so sad and wondered why Mama hadn't taught him that she was not his slave but his mother. If slave were regarded not as a human, so was Masako. Then Kiyoko suddenly remembered that her mother once whispered her if only Hiroyuki would have died while he was still a small boy. When he was younger, he still had a warm and sympathetic heart to ask Mother if she was all right whenever he found Mother was taking medicine. (368)

It was Masako's regret that she could not bring up her son in the way she wished, but she hadn't had the faintest idea to kill her son to accomplish her mothering and dream. She knew she was a weak woman, too weak to overcome any oppression put upon her by the traditional home as institution.

V

On the other hand our other heroine Sethe could love her children more freely and passionately than any women. Her intimate friend, Paul D, suspected that she could not satisfy herself with a "thin" love because she believed thin love wasn't love at all. However Paul D, who had undergone all the sacrifices as slave, thought her love was rather risky for an ex-slave woman because hers was too "thick." As Furman observes, Sethe was the kind of woman who "loved something other than herself so much, she has placed all of the values of her life in something outside herself" in her children<sup>3</sup>. The author also wants to claim that without any doubt Masako was that kind of woman who placed all of her life in the make-belief reputation given to her family by the community. To Paul D, the best thing was to love just a little bit. His conception of love was quite far from that of Sethe's. If her love had not been that strong and that thick, she would not have committed infanticide, nor would she have sacrificed her best for the sake of love. Ironically her love which once encouraged her to survive and support her children was now the one which damaged herself because it was too "thick."

In comparison, Sethe's love for children and for her home was astonishingly active and dynamic because she fought against slavery and its regime simply to protect her family, while Masako's love for her son and home was apparently passive and less defensive, clearly due to the legacy from the past which had established the patriarchal social norm in Japan.

When we come to consider Sethe's strong love for her children and for her home, the author assumes that it was "Sweet Home" that gave fundamental and immediate influences on Sethe. While she was at Sweet Home under the guardianship of Mr. Garner "who was a real Kentuckian and an idealist to call his slaves all men," ( 12 ) Sethe learned what home would be like and how it should be like. So in spite of an unrealistic and make-believe society which Sweet Home was, she could actually have a family with Halle, a slave man at Sweet Home. However, Sethe's home was too fragile and too romantic to last long. Nevertheless, without these experiences at Sweet Home, even though unbelievably dream-like and romantic the place was, Sethe couldn't have fostered her image of home and family. One more thing to claim is that without these experiences there, paradoxically saying, she wouldn't have been so naive as to believe in freedom and her sweet home, nor would she have risked her life in order to prevent her children from being taken back into slavery.

Although the novel *Beloved* may be not about slavery but about whole black people

called slaves who had been brought to America<sup>4</sup>, I suggest that this masterpiece would not have been completed without telling slavery as an institution because it did give tremendous effect upon Sethe's way of thinking and behavior. After Mr. Garner, their guardian and an idealist, passed away, and their new owner, School Teacher succeeded to the plantation of Sweet Home, Sethe had to face to the reality of slavery; she realized how cruel and inhumane the slavery was. It treated Sethe and her children with an evil's policy, thus leaving her family disintegrated and left herself deeply demoralized with life.

But Sethe's desire for home was never out of her mind: we can recall her happy whispering on the way back from a carnival. There was a long shadow of the three people: Denver leaning her face on her mother's shoulder, Paul D. kicking a stone in a happy way and yelling back at the crows, and Sethe holding hands of these two. The text reads: "Nobody noticed but Sethe." And Sethe whispered secretly in her heart: "A life. Could be." ( 56 ) This scene gave us a strong recognition that Sethe still had a sweet sentiment for home and continuing aspiration for it.

## VI

Consequently Masako couldn't implement her dream, nor any hope to integrate her family again, but rather stayed alone suffering from illness which was, without any doubt, caused by emotional isolation and discrimination within her own family. It is true that she was run over by a car on the night, but we could take another viewpoint that she might have killed herself, because she could not find any value in her false family. On the other hand Sethe killed her child because she could not find any hope in returning back to slavery, which was to her and her children worse than death. Sethe loved her home so that she could keep her family together. Masako too loved her home if only she could play mothering for her children. There was no requiem for her, but people would say that now Masako would be happier without being no more bothered by malicious reputations and jealousy by her community. It will not be pointless to say that home as institution drove Masako to death as a result. If so, we can say Masako was a victim of home as an institution. And Sethe was, too: she was a victim of "crushed" home that actually slavery produced. Both of them were confined by and constrained to the institutions; home as one institution, slavery as another institution.

To conclude my paper, I claim our two heroines honestly sacrificed themselves to the extent that they so selflessly had risked their lives only to protect their homes respectively, and in the course of their lives both of them did share the same burden: the burden of the past. Masako was restricted to the legacy of the traditional

Japanese household, which is the institution handed down to her from the past. Ever since the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate which lasted 300 years, women in Japan have never been free from, but restricted to the patriarchal society, while Sethe also endured the burden of slavery which had lasted as long as 300 years to end up with. Under the longtime burden and tortures, people would be easily demoralized with life and discouraged to claim any hope to freedom. This time span of 300 years, therefore, doesn't mean merely a time-length but something fatal deeply inscribed in the heart of a people.

## VII

Home for Sethe was neither the green and white picture-perfect house of white people's story, as shown in the primer "Dick and Jane", nor was it the romantic and dream-like one as "Sweet Home" was, where Sethe once enjoyed a family love with Halle, Paul D and other slaves. Her real home being deserted on 124 Bluestone Road was scarily haunted and full of grievances. While for Masako, home was never the site where she could nurture family love and play mothering; it was a false family consisting of gruesome apathy among family members in the same household. Her life was surely subject to other member's cruel whims to which she could offer no voice of protest. Masako could do nothing but obey the monster of her home. Masako was never given any tribute, nor recognition while and after her life.

We all know how brutally slavery as an institution damaged Sethe and her home. Home was certainly not rosy site for Sethe. However, it was still home that attracted both of them and it never allowed them to run away from. Being otherwise such a cozy, magnetic site for everyone, home is just like a peaceful harbor to which and from which any ship can freely pass in the voyage of life. I believe no one wants to run away from home - as Masako and Sethe never did, because *it is home*.

## Notes

This paper is based on my oral presentation— "Home as Institution in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sono Ayako's *The False Family*" for the Second Biennial Conference of the Toni Morrison Society, in September 28 ~30,2000, at Lorain County Community College, Elyria, Ohio, USA.

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- 1 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994): 56.  
Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.
- 2 Sono Ayako, "*Kyokoh-no-Ie*" (Tokyo: Bunshun-Bunko, 1995): 93  
Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.
- 3 Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison: "A Conversation," *Southern Review* 21  
(1985): 584
- 4 As for the theme of *Beloved*, Jan Furman explains Morrison's intention:  
But Morrison's queries in *Beloved* are not about what Sethe does or why. These answers are available to anyone with knowledge of slavery. Morrison asks who. Who is the woman capable of making such a choice? Who is the woman with such audacity? See Fan Furman: "Remembering The Disremembered." Toni Morrison's Fiction. (University of South Carolina Press. 1996): 69

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