

## Review

# Mother or monster: A postcolonial study of two pathological women in postcolonial literature

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The loveliness and selflessness of the relation between a mother and a child do not need any explanation to be proved as it is universally known and established. Motherhood is a universal concept, but in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and in Morrison's *Beloved* this concept has been damaged. Both of these novels have shown motherhood with monstrosity. Monstrosity is a concept like beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder and can therefore be interpreted differently. In these two novels mothers have been presented with excessive violence. Both of the novels dealt with an unnatural thing that the mother killed her own child which really does not sound usual and lacks credibility. But these two women did that impossible thing and this paper will try to find out the reasons why these mothers did that work. It will analyze these two women on one hand as child-killing ugly monsters and on the other hand, only as desperate but caring mothers.

**Key words:** Double colonization, infanticide, monstrous feminine, neo-colonialism, violence.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of infanticide is not new to literature arena. In Greek mythology, Medea killed her own child. Authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Dred*, Hattia M. Keehan in *Liberty and Death*, Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, Ngugi Wa Thinongo in *Petals of Blood* and so many have dealt with this concept. This paper only focuses on finding out the reasons from the perspective of post colonialism which direct a mother towards killing of her infant. It thus deconstructs the idea of monstrous mother to show the reasons for which a mother becomes a killer of her own child and to locate the position of a woman in a society especially in a society where women are double colonized and are considered 'Monstrous Feminine' in terms of society focusing on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Ngugi Wa Thinongo's *Petals of Blood*.

Now it is better to answer what "Monstrous Feminine" is. 'Monstrous Feminine' is the image of the repulsively fecund mother figure whose generative powers inspire horror. For Bakhtin (1984), the 'pregnant hag' is the quintessential image of the grotesque body which is valorized in his account of Carnavalesque. For the feminist, however, the image of the pregnant hag is an ambivalent one. Kristeva (1982) explores this ambivalence in her work on the Abjection of the Maternal Body. The feminist film critic Barbara Creed (1993) explores the prevalence of image of monstrous femininity in recent cinema as a product of male fears and anxieties about women. But in this paper, we have used this term in presenting those mothers who have some unusual qualities like killing of their own child in brutal

way which is termed infanticide. As a means of emphasizing the horrific nature of their actions, these women were labeled “inhuman mothers”, guilty of “cold-blooded atrocities”, “cruel”, “callous”, “iron-hearted” and totally devoid of maternal feelings.

Another important issue is ‘infanticide’ which is an unavoidable aspect of modern life that is both a psychic and social reality. In everyday usage, infanticide means ‘one who kills an infant or murders a child’; ‘the killing of an infant’; or ‘the practice/custom of killing newborn children’ (Oxford English Dictionary). In a detailed manner, infanticide means the putting to death of the newborn with the consent of the parent, family, or community. Female infanticide was common in some traditional patriarchal societies. In certain societies, children who are deformed or are believed tainted by evil (example, twins) may be slain at birth. In Greece and ancient Rome a child was virtually its father's chattel- in Roman law, the *Patria Potestas* granted the father the right to dispose of his offspring as he saw fit. In Sparta the decision was made by a public official. Child sacrifice occurs in many traditional societies for religious reasons, but human sacrificial victims were generally appreciated by members of society, unlike victims of infanticide, who were devalued. Christianity, Islam and Judaism condemn infanticide as murder, and in all countries the act is a crime. If infanticide serves as a means of limiting family size, as many anthropologists believe, then the introduction of contraceptives, abortion, and other methods of population control may have rendered it obsolete. The term ‘infanticide’ also refers to a mother who murders her child. Although it is not so usual to find a story about a mother who drowned her eight-month-old baby in a washing machine or a mother who murdered her babies and kept their corpses in her freezer amongst more mundane daily news items, sometimes the reader finds that fiction comes true in real life.

Morrison brings slavery, racism and sexism in her writing which are the very common themes in black literature. Sethe lives under the triple oppression of these three things. Under the slavery system, black women are suffering from the poor economic condition and they have to work outside their homes, which makes it hardly possible for them to offer proper care for their children. Slavery is a system under which people are treated as property and are forced to work. Slaves can be held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase or birth, and deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work, or to demand compensation. The Negro slave system that was employed and refined over this 300 year period was the extreme form known as commercial slavery, in which slaves were not just made to labor in domestic capacities or forced into concubinage but provided the dominant work force of entire economics. Early forms of slavery often granted slaves a much higher degree of freedom, and sometimes even permitted them to be integrated into social or family group in ways that

allowed them to be assimilated and even to acquire power and wealth. The European institutionalization of commercial slavery in the late sixteenth century offered colonizing powers a seemingly endless source of plantation labor, exploited by an ideology of absolute possession in which Africans became objects of European exchange. Commercial slavery was the logical extension both of the need to acquire a cheap labor force for burgeoning planter economies, and of the desire to construct Europe's cultures as ‘civilized’ in contrast to the native, the cannibal and the savage (Ashcroft et al., 1998). The slavery system not only consumed the black physically but also destroyed them spiritually. In *Beloved*, Sethe, a black woman and mother, is suffering from loss of motherhood under slavery. Motherhood posed a problematic challenge to Afro-American women under the slave regime. The situation, which did not allow mothers the opportunity and freedom to nurture their children or perform their biological role as caregivers and mothers to their children, and especially their female children, had very debilitating consequences on the psyche of the women.

In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, the inequality, hypocrisy and betrayal of peasants and workers of Kenya are described where the setting is a neo-colonized one. In dictionary meaning, neo-colonialism is the policy of a strong nation in seeking political and economic hegemony over an independent nation or extended geographical area without necessarily reducing the subordinate nation or area to the legal status of a colony. In postcolonial theory, neo-colonialism is a term used by post-colonial critics as developed countries' involvement in the developing world. Writings within the theoretical framework of neocolonialism argue that existing or past international economic arrangements created by former colonial powers were or are used to maintain control of their former colonies and dependencies after the colonial independence movements of the post-World War II period. In broader usage the charge of neocolonialism has been leveled at powerful countries and transnational economic institutions who involve themselves in the affairs of less powerful countries. In this sense, 'Neo-colonialism implies a form of contemporary, economic Imperialism: that powerful nations behave like colonial powers, and that this behavior is 'likened to' colonialism in a post-colonial world. In this paper, we have used this term to show the hypocrisy of the colonizers in the term of developing the economic condition of the colonized countries.

The novel shows how the economic system of capitalism and its destructive, alienating effects on traditional Kenyan society have brought a mother in that condition that she has become so much vindictive that she takes the life of her own child.

In *Petals of Blood* one of the main characters, Wanja, the central female character in the novel, a bar-girl-turned-prostitute, is presented as a monstrous mother

who kills her premature child. From the surface level, she seems to be a monster mother who does not hesitate to take the life of her own child. If anyone analyzes the situation in which she was leading her life may be his/her notion about a monstrous mother will be changed. Women are oppressed by both the class of exploiters and the patriarchal society, in spite of their regenerative power and contribution to human civilization or to the development of societies as well as nations since the ancient age of human being on the earth. In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* Wanja has been a whore and she thought it right to devour all the compradors of the neocolonial powers at work. Her violent activities prove her to be a real rebel where she finds herself to be doubly colonized by patriarchy and neocolonialism. Wanja, a simple rural woman, turns to a rebel because of the effect of neocolonialism and male domination. In neocolonial era there was prosperity, contentment and a sense of belonging before the penetration of imperialism with its distorting influence, and the intrusion of imperialist values which brought Ilmorog into its decline, hence the author informs the readers that,

... Ilmorog...had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herds men. It had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature's forests and, breaking the soil between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men.... In those days there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers and no insect-flies feeding on the fat and blood of unsuspecting toilers (Ngugi, 1978).

Glorious Ilmorog is transformed into a proto-capitalist society with all the attendant problems of prostitution, social inequalities, misery, uncertainty, and inadequate housing. The new Ilmorog is now divided along class lines. There is the residential area "of the farm managers, country council officials, the managers of Barclays, and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money power" (Ngugi, 1978). The economic deprivation and ruthless dispossession of the peasants find its most effective symbol in the degradation of Wanja, the barmaid, who rises from prostitution to economic independence and womanhood but is forced back to the humiliating status of a prostitute who sells her body because nothing is obtained free, and thus the slogan becomes "eat or be eaten". When Wanja allows herself to be attracted by Western values, she becomes a prostitute only to acquire beauty, dignity and wholesome by returning to be a peasant at the end.

Before judging her as a mother or monster it is necessary to know about her childhood. In her childhood, she falls in love with a boy named Ritho: Ritho's letters...my love is as uncountable as the sands of the

sea, the trees in the forest, or the stars in the sky or the cells of my body....and his ambitions and now I wanted to laugh and tell my mother about Ritho and his dreams of becoming an engineer (Ngugi, 1978).

But all her dreams were shattered by the beating from her parents. And the beating by her parents made her rebellious for the first time: "For days and weeks I planned vengeance. My parents had often beaten me, but it was the first time I was so rebellious in my thoughts" (Ngugi, 1978).

Moreover, she was disturbed by her math teacher as well as by the friend of his father. "I used to be his best student and he had set his eyes on me. My breasts were a little bit more developed than those of the other girls and I had a full body. He used all sorts of excuses to detain me a little longer in school" (Ngugi, 1978). And later she was pregnant by her father's wealthy friend, Kimeria. She went to that man for marriage but the man had betrayed her. Wanja found her all alone without anybody who would help her. The beautiful world seemed to her a nasty world where all the people are dirty. Vengeance was growing more and more by day by day in her mind. She was a runaway girl who had left her parents behind and there was no place for her in this world. So she decided to go to the brothel and no pregnant woman was allowed to go there. If she wanted to give birth to the baby she had to earn her daily food but she had no way to earn her livelihood. She took the decision to join the brothel, killed her premature child and disposed it off in a drain.

I looked for two things in vain: I have desperately looked for a child...a child of my own...Do you know how it feels for a woman not to have a child? When Mwathi was here, I went to him. His voice behind the partition said....woman, you have sinned: confess! I could not tell him. I could not quite tell him that I was once pregnant, that I did have a child....that the world has suddenly loomed so large and menacing and that, for a girl who had just left school and had run away from home....that....that....that I did throw it, my newly born, into a latrine....There! I have said it..... (Ngugi, 1978).

This statement explicitly shows extreme desire of Wanja to become a mother. She has killed her child but it was her helplessness caused by her loneliness and she was not capable to fight with this nasty world. "I've prayed to God for one more chance...one more chance...it has never been possible....I have even tried to get out of this life...God knows I have tried....Every times something has happened to thwart me in my desire to escape" (Ngugi, 1978). Wanja "can at times be selfish, callous and vindictive" (Ngugi, 1978). She avenges herself on Munira in humiliating him by making him pay for sex with her (Ngugi, 1978), fulfilling her promise to be "a hard woman . . . and somebody, either now or later, will have to pay" (Ngugi, 1978). Wanja also kills Kimeria out of

vengeance (Ngugi, 1978), an utterly undomesticated, monstrous motherly act that accords with Wanja's paradoxical sense of self as a woman: Wanja's murder of Kimeria is designed to show that her anger is now directed in an appropriate direction; it demonstrates that, unlike any metaphysical mother of mercy, she will remain as unforgiving as she is not forgiven. In other words, despite her numerous strengths, Wanja is quite human, and subject to human pride and error, anger, and passion. Although she certainly functions as allegory, she is not merely the archetypal mother. Wanja finds new hope which is derived from her child:

Wanja got a piece of charcoal and a piece of cardboard. For one hour or so she remained completely absorbed in her sketching. And suddenly she felt lifted out of her own self, she felt waves of emotion she had never before experienced. The figure began to take shape on the board. It was a combination of the [androgynous] sculpture she once saw at the lawyer's place in Nairobi and the images of Kimathi in his moments of triumph and laughter and sorrow and terror—but without one limb. When it was over, she felt a tremendous calm, a kind of inner assurance to the possibilities of a new kind of power (Ngugi, 1978).

In fact her "eat or be eaten" philosophy is an expression of the destructive rivalry of capitalism, and is no more moral than the self-serving greed of the Kimeria's. In this circumstance, she could not make herself eligible to bear the expense of a child and she did not want that her child came in that awful environment. She did not want a child who would be the fruit of an illegal relationship rather she wanted a child which would be the fruit of an adorable relationship. Though in the beginning, her image was depicted as a failure mother, at the end of the book there is an image of a desperate mother. She became desperate for having a child and for that reason she spent her nights with lots of people. She herself knew that she had committed a sin by killing her own child; for that reason she wanted to repent. Wanja's earlier murder of her new-born child is, by contrast, an abuse of both her power to destroy, and to create. Wanja comes to feel that in choosing to murder her own child that she "had murdered her own life". Her barrenness is not simply physical, but expressive of a far deeper spiritual and emotional lack of fulfillment. At the height of her affair with Karega, Wanja feels she is "about to flower," but is deprived of her opportunity. It is only after the fire that this finally comes about. Having positively renounced her exploitative role, Wanja approaches the world with a new consciousness. Her pregnancy and her reunion with her mother, while a little contrived and melodramatic, are meaningful expressions of her new flowering. Wanja is no longer the "outsider" as the meaning of her name implies. She experiences a homecoming and reaffirms her identity with her Ilmorog

origins. Wanja's pregnancy is a symbol of hope and regeneration, a promise for the future. Her liberation is not to be achieved through her union with a man, but through her fulfillment as an independent woman. In reply to her mother asking whose child she is bearing, Wanja does not give a straightforward answer, but draws a picture in which the image of Abdulla is merged with other images of the people's struggle:

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Through her drawing Wanja feels for the first time the exhilaration of her creative power, expressed both in her artistry and her pregnancy. Her confidence no longer comes from the cynical manipulation of the power of her body over men, but from a new sense of worth and self-respect. The sculpture Wanja mentions had puzzled the marchers from Ilmorog because it was a figure that possessed both male and female features, "as if it was a man and a woman in one." Wanja can be seen as a metaphor of "Mother Africa" which in the beginning of the novel was founded as a whore, abused and exploited by the men. In the ending of the novel, by killing the three criminals it has shown the possibilities of Kenya. Wanja's pregnancy symbolizes the potentials of new Kenya. Wanja is herself a Kenya who is gaining her reproductive power. Her desperation for being a mother demolishes the concept of "Monstrous Mother."

In *Beloved*, Morrison accounts human catastrophe, the sadness of black slavery under capitalism, imperialism, colonialism and post colonialism. The main theme of the novel *Beloved* is slavery in Ohio during the mid-1800s, and how Sethe, an escaped slave and mother, is confronted by her dead daughter Beloved who has come back from the dead to claim emotional and physical revenge. Critics like Marilyn Sanders Mobley in her essay "A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" and Bernard W. Bell in his essay, "*Beloved*: A Womanist Neo- Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past", told that *Beloved* is an extension of slave narratives. It is a compelling novel about a mother's effort to free her children from slavery, but the way she does is both cruel and horrible. She commits infanticide on her own child. The cruelty does not end with the murder. After she had killed her own baby girl, Sethe fed her youngest daughter from the breast that was covered with the blood of her

dead child. We consider this action to be cruel to her still-living baby who is forced to taste her sister's blood as she is too small to resist and understand it. As a result, the question of Sethe being a bad mother has reached the surface. Qualities that are considered to be characteristics of bad mothers vary a great deal, but to kill your own child (like Sethe did) would certainly be seen as one of the criteria. How can a normal mother bring herself to cut her own child's throat? "That woman is crazy. Crazy" (Morrison, 1988). According to the so called 'normal' human being, no mother can take the life of her child. Thus a mother can be labeled as insane or monster. In *Beloved*, Sethe's actual purpose of killing all her children inside an outbuilding behind Grandma Baby's home failed when the slave catcher entered the building and stopped her. Her other three children were still alive, but they had watched their mother's cruel deed and after that were afraid of her, and of what she was capable of. The youngest daughter even feared for her own life (Morrison, 1988).

Now what could be the possible factors that indulged a mother to kill her child? Sethe was a runaway slave woman who had fled from the place she belonged to, to go to her mother-in-law where she felt she and her children would be safer. The day when she killed her baby, a slave catcher accompanied by some other men had come to take them back to work on Sweet Home, the place Sethe used to belong to (Morrison, 1988). Sethe could not just let that happen. She wanted to save her children from a miserable, dehumanized life as slaves. The list of tortures she did undergo is endless. The White left no stone unturned in beating, whipping and mutilating the skin of Black slaves. The master took undue advantage of the female bodies who were working under them. In fact black women suffered more than the black men. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese says, "Since the nineteenth century, it has been common to assert that slavery was necessarily worse for women than for men, since they were subjected to special brutality and indignity on account of their sex" (p 98).

Economic reasons more than any others had led to the killing of infants in the slavery era and have continued to exert an unfortunate influence even down to our own day. The African - American setup is the example where economic factors led to the sorrowful phase of the Black community. Infanticide, shown in the novel is of many forms. It is not just a murder in literal sense but also murdering an infant mentally or psychologically by curbing the desires and rights. *Beloved* is a documentation of all such infanticides, the most pathetic, being the murder of Beloved by her mother by cutting her throat. Apart from these instances it is shown that Sethe's mother also committed infanticide when she threw her children at birth, "without names" (Morrison, 1988). Another instance of infanticide is when Ella, another black slave admits that she too killed the children born from her white masters. Denver is also a victim of child

abuse. The initial years of her childhood are spent in prison along with her mother. She is mocked by the society for the crime committed by her mother. Her mother never reveals her past to Denver which makes Denver loses faith on Sethe. The rest of her childhood is spent in fear of being killed by her mother. She is a psychologically scared child. Denver speaks for herself, "I spent my entire outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me..." (Morrison, 1988). She waited for a miracle to happen, so, she could be away from Sethe. Sethe is a declared culprit by law and even by the society. But what compels her to take such cruel action is the fear of slavery and exploitation for her daughter. The owners of the plantations, schoolteachers and his nephews violate her motherhood by stealing her milk from her bosom.

Later on, when Beloved returns to take emotional and physical revenge on her mother, she tries to make Beloved understand why she killed her. She wanted her to understand what it meant to kill her own child, "what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb" (Morrison, 1988).

She tries to explain to Beloved that she could not let slavery control her children's lives the way it had controlled hers. The only way out, as she saw it, was death. Even though her whole life, and her family's life, was destroyed forever, something good came out of it in the end: "The society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery" (Morrison, 1988).

The maternal bonds, that connect Sethe to her children, inhibit her own individuation and prevent the development of her. Sethe develops a dangerous maternal passion that results in the murder of one daughter, her own "best self," and the estrangement of the surviving daughter from the black community, both in an attempt to salvage her "fantasy of the future," her children, from a life in slavery. However, Sethe fails to recognize her daughter Denver's need for interaction with this community in order to enter into womanhood. Denver finally succeeds at the end of the novel in establishing her own self and embarking on her individuation with the help of Beloved. Contrary to Denver, Sethe only reaches individuation after Beloved's exorcism, at which point Sethe can fully accept the first relationship that is completely "for her," her relationship with Paul D. This relationship relieves Sethe from the ensuing destruction of herself that resulted from the maternal bonds controlling her life. Beloved and Sethe are both very much emotionally impaired as a result of Sethe's previous enslavement. Slavery creates a situation where a mother is separated from her child, which has devastating consequences for both parties. Often, mothers do not know themselves to be anything except a mother, so when they are unable to provide maternal care for their children, or their children are taken away

from them, they feel a lost sense of self. Similarly, when a child is separated from his or her mother, he or she loses the familial identity associated with mother-child relationships. Sethe was never able to see her mother's true face, so she was not able to connect with her own mother, and therefore does not know how to connect to her own children, even though she longs to. Furthermore, the earliest need, a child has, is related to the mother: the baby needs milk from the mother. Sethe is traumatized by the experience of having her milk stolen because it means she cannot form the symbolic bond between herself and her daughter.

The blacks in American society before the abolition of slavery were tradable properties, and the price was controlled by the white, the dominator. Sethe sells hers to exchange a word, "*Beloved*," on her daughter's "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" (Morrison, 1988).

Her mother pointed at the mark and told her: The burnt mark points out that the black woman's right as a mother has been deprived and Sethe's maternal love and family life are taken away, too. Therefore, Sethe dreams of a well-preserved family. She chooses Baby Suggs's filial son to be her husband and dreams of a wedding ceremony to start her marriage. However, from Mrs. Garner, she realizes that all she has to do for marriage is to ask for their owner's permission (Morrison, 1988). Moreover, a calamitous result is that her mother-figure, as well as her dreamed family life, is corrupted by slavery. Being a slave, she has been beaten as an animal though she is pregnant, and she has no right to preserve her milk for her children. However, even animals can protect their offspring, but "milk-stealing" shows that Sethe is incapable of being a mother-figure under slavery. Therefore, when schoolteacher and his nephew come to Bluestone to seize Sethe and her children, Sethe uses an extreme way to stop them—she would rather kill her children than letting them to be taken back to be slaves like her. Sethe's infanticide was the only alternative under the threat of slavery: Morrison describes how slavery restricted the behaviors and consciousness of mothers who were quite often deprived of the right of mothering. Sethe's lack of communication with her own mother drives her into an extremely protective and, at the same time, deranged motherhood. The only way for a run-away slave mother to save her children from the brutally uncivilized institution of slavery is to terminate her children's lives by her own hand before they are recaptured... Slave mothers, whose maternal integrity frequently violated, attempted to protect their children by any means necessary and expressed their love toward their children in an extraordinary way, as seen in Sethe's infanticide: "The society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery" (Morrison, 1988).

*Beloved* captures the spirit of preceding century, when slavery was in practice and where a mother had to face

many hardships to bear a child. Sethe was beaten, her milk was stolen, her back was scarred, her delivery took place on board, and her husband left her in this male dominated colonized Black society. Even then she believed that she could raise her children. She slew her daughter to protect her from the torture what she herself experienced. With sheer confidence and sense of possession she says, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, 1988). Wilfred D Samuels and Glenora Hudson Weems remark in this respect, "clearly, her intention here is not denial but rationalization; yet, it is rationalization based on conviction" (Wilfred and Hudson, 1990).

There is no doubt that infanticide or killing own child is the worst crime all over the world. It is totally unacceptable that a mother will kill her own child. But as Morrison tells, "Definitions belong to the definers- not the defined" (Morrison, 1988). So readers have to find out the exact definition to define the act. Here, Wanja and Sethe are two idealized fictional mothers who are unequivocally justified in killing their children to protect them from the horrors of a slave life. They do not want their children to wake, see and feel the terror of being enslaved. Morrison and Ngugi break the archetypal mother image like all-nurturing, caring and devoted Great Mother and allow multiple perspectives on maternity. Here both Wanja and Sethe try to internalize slavery in their own way where they fiercely try not only to protect but also to possess. *Beloved* and *Petals of Blood* focus on the impact of slavery, racism and sexism on the capacity for love, faith and community of black families, especially on the black women during slavery and Reconstruction period and how these things direct a mother towards infanticide. The slave women were never designated for being mothers. They were considered only as the breeder. "Their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows" (Davis, 1981). Morrison or Ngugi do not aim at giving the judgment on the act of Sethe or Wanja. It is left to the readers to analyze their decision. Since solidarity is the proposed solution to the humiliations suffered by the blacks, therefore, the crime of Sethe or Wanja cannot be viewed as an isolated decision. The contemporary community is also directly and indirectly involved in the execution of the infanticide. It seems that harsh judgment should be reserved for the society that permitted and endorsed a system of slavery so cruel that it turned a baby's death into a kind of sweet release to those mothers who would want this heinous act as the last option of their life.

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