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Haunted Milk, Hollow Markets, Maternal Spectrality, Patriarchal Trade, and Feminist IR Readings of AGOA through Toni Morrison's Beloved

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Toni Morrison's Beloved as a critical feminist International Relations (IR) text that exposes the structural continuities between slavery-era reproductive violence and contemporary global political economy. Anchored in Morrison's concept of rememory, the study argues that the novel's spectral maternal motifs—particularly stolen milk, infanticidal protection, and communal rebirth—function as analytic tools for understanding how patriarchal systems of extraction persist beyond formal emancipation. By situating Beloved within feminist IR, this research reframes literary trauma not as historical memory alone, but as an ongoing political condition embedded in international economic structures. Through a close reading of Beloved, the thesis theorises the theft of Sethe's breast milk as an act of commodification of reproductive labour, wherein Black motherhood is rendered extractable, punishable, and economically exploitable. This logic, the study contends, reappears in contemporary trade regimes—most notably the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)—where African women's labour sustains global apparel supply chains while remaining systematically undervalued. Feminist IR concepts of everyday violence and patriarchal privilege reveal how global trade policies, though framed as development instruments, reproduce gendered harm through low wages, labour precarity, environmental toxicity, and sexual coercion in export-oriented industries. Integrating political economy with feminist economics, the thesis draws on motherhood penalty theory, particularly the work of Claudia Goldin, to demonstrate how global markets disproportionately penalise women for reproductive and caregiving labour. In AGOA-export economies, women's concentration in apparel work is not incidental but structural: motherhood reduces bargaining power, increases vulnerability, and makes women ideal subjects for exploitation under neoliberal trade. This analysis positions maternal labour as central—rather than peripheral—to international economic policy, challenging the presumed gender neutrality of trade agreements. Finally, the thesis addresses a critical gap across literary studies, feminist IR, and trade scholarship by employing Beloved as a methodological framework rather than a symbolic reference. While extensive research exists on trauma and motherhood in Morrison's work and on AGOA's economic outcomes, no study to date integrates maternal literary motifs into feminist trade analysis. By doing so, this research proposes narrative-driven, gender-just trade reforms, arguing that women's embodied experiences must be recognised as legitimate sources of international political knowledge. Until trade regimes confront their reliance on gendered extraction, the thesis concludes, the spectral presence of Beloved will continue to haunt global markets.

Keywords: *Toni Morrison, Beloved, Feminist International Relations, Motherhood, Reproductive Labour, Economic Violence, African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Global Political Economy, Motherhood Penalty, Gender and Trade, Postcolonial Feminism, Rememory.*

INTRODUCTION: BELOVED, REMEMORY, AND GLOBAL TRADE

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* opens in a house haunted by a child who refuses to remain buried, insisting that slavery's violence is neither finished nor forgettable. Through the concept of *rememory*, Morrison theorises trauma as spatial, embodied, and recursive—capable of resurfacing wherever the material conditions that produced it persist. This study argues that such hauntings are not confined to literary space but extend into contemporary global systems, particularly international trade regimes that continue to extract value from racialised women's bodies. By reading *Beloved* through a feminist International Relations (IR) lens, this thesis positions the novel as a critical intervention into global political economy rather than solely a historical narrative.

Central to Morrison's critique is the systematic destruction and appropriation of Black motherhood under slavery. Sethe's repeated declaration—"they took my milk"—marks not only an act of sexual violence but the forcible expropriation of reproductive labour. Motherhood in *Beloved* is rendered precarious, dangerous, and criminalised; maternal love becomes an act of resistance within a system that treats women's bodies as property. This precarity is not limited to Sethe alone but is inherited across generations of enslaved women, revealing motherhood as a historically fractured institution rather than a stable biological role. This thesis reframes that moment as a foundational scene of **patriarchal economic extraction**, arguing that the theft of milk symbolises how care, nourishment, and survival are diverted away from Black families to sustain white wealth. Morrison thus exposes motherhood as a political economy structured by violence rather than a private, apolitical domain.

The thesis extends this analysis into the contemporary international system by examining the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a trade policy often celebrated for promoting development through export-led growth. Despite its promises, AGOA has entrenched gendered labour hierarchies in African apparel industries, where women constitute the majority of the workforce yet remain underpaid, overworked, and vulnerable to environmental and sexual harm. Feminist IR scholarship demonstrates that trade is never gender-neutral; however, policy analysis rarely treats women's reproductive and caregiving burdens as central to economic design. By placing *Beloved* alongside AGOA, this study reveals how the same logic that once extracted milk from enslaved women now extracts labour from factory workers—under the legitimising language of development and opportunity.

This thesis therefore asks: **how do Toni Morrison's spectral maternal motifs in *Beloved* expose the patriarchal hauntings of economic violence within contemporary trade policy, particularly AGOA?** While existing scholarship examines trauma and motherhood in *Beloved* and critiques AGOA's labour outcomes separately, no study to date integrates literary maternal trauma into feminist IR analysis of trade. Addressing this gap, the present research employs Morrison's motifs as an interpretive framework for international political economy, demonstrating how maternal bodies remain sites of extraction across historical epochs. In doing so, the thesis contributes to feminist IR by asserting that women's lived, embodied experiences—especially those shaped by motherhood—must be recognised as foundational to understanding and reforming global economic systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Literature Review

1. Motherhood, Trauma, and Rememory in *Beloved*

Scholarship on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has overwhelmingly focused on trauma, memory, and motherhood as the novel's central thematic concerns. Literary critics read Sethe's maternal love as both a site of resistance and a tragic consequence of slavery's destruction of kinship. The concept of *rememory* has been widely interpreted as Morrison's intervention into historical silence, allowing enslaved women's experiences—particularly maternal loss, sexual violence, and forced separation—to persist beyond linear time. Studies emphasise how slavery transforms motherhood into a condition of fear, where love itself becomes dangerous and potentially lethal. Motherhood in *Beloved* is thus understood as traumatised, excessive, and socially unintelligible within both slave and post-slavery contexts.

Feminist literary analyses further highlight how Morrison centres Black women's reproductive experiences as political rather than merely emotional. Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Sethe's mother collectively represent a genealogy of maternal dispossession under slavery. Scholars have examined the stolen milk episode as emblematic of sexual violence and bodily violation, while infanticide is interpreted as a radical, though tragic, refusal of property relations. However, much of this scholarship remains anchored within literary, psychoanalytic, or cultural frameworks, rarely extending its insights into broader systems of political economy or global governance.

2. Feminist International Relations and Gendered Political Economy

Feminist International Relations (IR) scholarship challenges the assumption that global politics operates independently of everyday life. Feminist IR scholars argue that international systems—war, diplomacy, development, and trade—are structured through gendered hierarchies that privilege masculine, elite, and Western perspectives while rendering women's labour invisible. Central to this tradition is the claim that the "international" is sustained through women's unpaid and underpaid work, including caregiving, social reproduction, and low-wage industrial labour.

Within feminist political economy, trade agreements are understood not as neutral mechanisms of growth but as gendered institutions that rely on women's economic vulnerability. Studies of export-oriented industrialisation consistently demonstrate that women are preferred as labourers due to assumptions about docility, dexterity, and disposability. Feminist IR literature has documented how global supply chains normalise low wages, weak labour protections, and sexual harassment, particularly in feminised sectors such as garments, electronics, and agriculture. Despite this, feminist IR analyses often remain theory-driven, with limited engagement with literary or cultural texts as sources of international insight.

3. AGOA, Development, and Gendered Labour

Policy-oriented scholarship on the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) largely evaluates its success in terms of export volumes, foreign investment, and employment generation. While some studies acknowledge that women constitute the majority of apparel workers in AGOA-exporting countries, gender is frequently treated as a secondary outcome rather than a structuring principle of the policy itself. Labour-focused critiques document poor working conditions, environmental degradation, and wage suppression, yet these harms are framed as implementation failures rather than systemic features of trade design.

A smaller body of feminist development literature critiques AGOA for reinforcing dependency, limiting industrial upgrading, and privileging multinational capital over local workers. However, even these analyses rarely interrogate reproductive labour, motherhood, or care work as central to trade outcomes. As a result, the embodied costs borne by women—particularly mothers—remain under-theorised within AGOA scholarship.

4. Motherhood Penalty and Feminist Economics

Feminist economics provides a crucial bridge between literary trauma and political economy through the concept of the motherhood penalty, most rigorously articulated by Claudia Goldin. This body of work demonstrates that women's earnings and career trajectories decline sharply after motherhood due to structural labour arrangements that reward uninterrupted, flexible, and care-free workers. While extensively studied in Western labour markets, the motherhood penalty has rarely been applied to global trade regimes, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

The absence of motherhood from trade analysis reflects a broader disciplinary divide: economics isolates productivity from care, IR isolates policy from bodies, and literary studies isolates trauma from material systems. This fragmentation obscures how global markets actively depend on women's reproductive labour while penalising them economically.

Research Gap

Despite rich scholarship across literature, feminist IR, political economy, and economics, these bodies of work remain largely disciplinarily siloed. Literary studies of *Beloved* powerfully analyse maternal trauma but do not extend their insights into contemporary international systems.

Feminist IR critiques gendered trade structures but rarely engage cultural texts as analytical frameworks. AGOA scholarship evaluates labour outcomes without interrogating motherhood or reproductive labour as central economic variables. Feminist economics theorises the motherhood penalty but does not situate it within postcolonial trade regimes.

What is missing is an integrated analytical framework that:

i. treats maternal trauma as political economy, not metaphor
ii. connects slavery-era reproductive extraction to neoliberal trade systems
iii. positions motherhood as a central category of international analysis
iv. uses literary rememory as a methodological tool in feminist IR

This thesis addresses that gap by reading *Beloved* as a feminist IR text that diagnoses the gendered violence embedded in global trade. By linking Morrison's maternal motifs to AGOA's labour structures, the study demonstrates how women's bodies—particularly maternal bodies—remain sites of extraction across historical epochs. In doing so, it contributes a novel, interdisciplinary intervention that reframes trade policy as an embodied, gendered, and historically haunted system, demanding feminist rethinking at both analytical and policy levels.

"They Took My Milk": From Sexual Violence to Economic Extraction

When Sethe repeats the line *"They took my milk"*, Toni Morrison names a violence that exceeds sexual assault and enters the terrain of political economy. The scene in which Schoolteacher's nephews pin Sethe down and suckle her breasts is not merely an act of bodily violation; it is the forcible expropriation of reproductive labour. Milk, produced through pregnancy and intended to sustain Sethe's infant, is violently diverted for the consumption and authority of others. As Morrison renders it, this theft is experienced by Sethe as more devastating than the whipping that scars her back into the shape of a chokecherry tree. The pain is not only physical but ontological: her motherhood is stripped of autonomy, dignity, and purpose.

The insistence with which Sethe repeats the phrase—*"And they took my milk"*—signals Morrison's refusal to allow the reader to interpret the assault as isolated cruelty. Instead, it reveals a system in which Black women's reproductive capacities are understood as extractable resources. The milk is not stolen accidentally; it is taken because patriarchal slavery recognises Black motherhood only insofar as it serves white survival, pleasure, or profit. When Sethe reports the assault, punishment is not directed at the perpetrators but redirected onto her body, as Schoolteacher orders her back whipped open while she is pregnant. This reversal of justice establishes a central rule of patriarchal power: resistance to extraction is itself criminalised.

This moment crystallises the core economic logic of slavery that Morrison exposes throughout *Beloved*:

i. Black women's bodies are commodities, valued for what they produce rather than who they are
ii. Reproductive labour is appropriated, not protected
iii. Maternal resistance is punished, not recognised
iv. Motherhood is permitted only when it aligns with power's interests

The stolen milk thus becomes a material metaphor for how slavery collapses the boundary between production and reproduction. Sethe's body is required to labour in the fields, reproduce future property, and provide nourishment—yet she retains no ownership over any of these outputs. Motherhood, under this regime, is neither private nor sacred; it is an economic site governed by violence.

This economy of maternal dispossession predates Sethe herself. Morrison reveals that Sethe's own mother was denied sustained motherhood under slavery, forced to abandon or destroy her other children before marking Sethe as the only one she chose to keep. Sethe learns that she herself was not nourished by her own mother's milk, but by another enslaved woman, inheriting motherhood as absence rather than continuity. This generational rupture establishes that the theft of milk is not an isolated violation but part of a longer historical system in which Black motherhood is systematically interrupted, fragmented, and rendered expendable across generations.

This logic of maternal dispossession predates Sethe herself. Morrison reminds us that Sethe's own mother was denied the possibility of sustained motherhood under slavery. She was forced to abandon or destroy her other children, marking Sethe as the only one she chose to keep, before being executed by her enslavers. Sethe learns that she herself was nursed not by her own mother but by another woman, inheriting motherhood as absence rather than continuity. This generational rupture reveals that the theft of milk is not a singular act of violence, but part of a longer historical economy in which Black motherhood is systematically interrupted, fragmented, and rendered disposable.

Crucially, Morrison refuses to seal this logic within the past. Through *rememory*, the theft of milk returns as a haunting question: where does this extraction reappear when slavery is declared over? This thesis argues that the answer lies in contemporary global trade regimes such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Under AGOA, African women constitute between 80–90% of apparel workers in export-processing zones, performing long hours of low-wage labour under conditions of surveillance, environmental toxicity, and sexual coercion. Their work sustains distant markets, global brands, and consumer economies, while their own reproductive lives—pregnancy, childcare, health—remain economically penalised and politically invisible.

Just as Sethe's milk is taken to sustain someone else's world, African women's labour is extracted to sustain global supply chains that promise development while delivering precarity. The continuity is not metaphorical but structural. The location changes—from Sweet Home plantation to garment factory—but the extraction remains. In both systems, women are chosen precisely because their labour is cheap, their resistance risky, and their care obligations exploitable. The same patriarchal logic that assumed entitlement over Sethe's milk now assumes entitlement over women's time, bodies, and futures under the legitimising language of trade and opportunity.

Seen through this lens, *Beloved* does not merely narrate historical trauma; it theorises the political economy of motherhood. The stolen milk becomes an analytic key for feminist International Relations, revealing how global markets continue to depend on the silent appropriation of women's reproductive and productive labour. Until trade systems confront this foundational violence, Morrison's ghost will continue to walk—reminding us that extraction does not end when its name changes.

Patriarchal Hauntings in AGOA: Gendered Trade, Maternal Precarity, and Economic Violence

If the theft of Sethe's milk exposes the foundational logic of patriarchal extraction under slavery, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) reveals how that same logic is reorganised—rather than dismantled—within contemporary global trade.

Introduced in 2000 as a development-oriented trade preference scheme, AGOA promised economic growth, employment, and integration into global markets for African countries.

Under AGOA, apparel production became the primary export sector for several African economies, especially Lesotho, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Women constitute between 70–90% of garment workers, a statistic often celebrated in policy discourse as evidence of women's "empowerment." However, this feminisation of labour is not accidental; it is structural. Women are preferred precisely because they are perceived as compliant, easily replaceable, and willing to accept poverty wages. As documented in Lesotho's garment industry, women routinely earn USD 1–2 per hour, far below living wages, while producing millions of garments annually for U.S. markets. Like Sethe's milk, their labour sustains distant economies while leaving their own survival fragile.

This further reveals how AGOA's labour regime extends extraction beyond wages into the terrain of maternal health and environmental violence. Factories discharge untreated dye water into rivers surrounding Maseru, contaminating the same water sources women use for cooking, washing, and bathing their children. This environmental harm inscribes itself onto maternal bodies and infant health: children develop chronic skin conditions, babies are born underweight or ill, and women's reproductive health deteriorates over time. Morrison's chokecherry tree—scar tissue transformed into landscape—reappears here as poisoned rivers and damaged bodies. Violence is no longer carved onto backs but diffused through ecosystems that mothers must navigate daily.

In addition to environmental harm, the document details how economic precarity pushes women into further vulnerability. Low wages and urban displacement compel some garment workers to engage in transactional sex to supplement income, contributing to disproportionately high HIV rates among women workers in Lesotho's apparel sector. This is not a moral failure but a structural outcome of trade design that renders women's survival conditional and their sexuality economically exposed. The factory supervisor who demands sex for overtime becomes a contemporary echo of Schoolteacher's nephews: different figures, same entitlement. Feminist IR identifies this as economic violence, where policy structures produce bodily harm without ever appearing violent in formal terms.

AGOA's policy architecture exacerbates these harms by externalising responsibility. Labour rights enforcement is weak, environmental standards are poorly monitored, and gender equity is treated as aspirational rather than binding. When AGOA lapsed in 2025 amid U.S. political gridlock, the consequences fell disproportionately on women: tariff increases threatened factory closures, job losses, and deeper poverty for tens of thousands of female workers. Once again, women's livelihoods were rendered expendable in the service of geopolitical negotiations—mirroring how enslaved women's maternal bonds were sacrificed to preserve plantation order

Through a feminist IR lens, AGOA thus emerges as a haunted policy regime—one that reproduces slavery's patriarchal logic while claiming developmental innocence. Like Sweet Home plantation, AGOA operates on an unspoken rule: women's labour and care are infinitely extractable, while their suffering remains politically marginal. Motherhood, rather than being protected, becomes a liability—pregnancy threatens employment, caregiving reduces productivity, and maternal health costs are borne privately rather than structurally addressed.

By placing *Beloved* alongside AGOA, this thesis demonstrates that the afterlife of slavery is not symbolic but institutional. The ghost that follows Sethe does not remain at 124 Bluestone Road; it crosses borders, enters factories, and settles into trade agreements that refuse to see women's bodies as political sites. Until international trade regimes confront their reliance on gendered and maternal extraction, AGOA—and policies like it—will remain haunted by the same violence Morrison insists we remember.

Motherhood Penalty and Feminist Political Economy: When Care Becomes a Liability

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals a brutal paradox at the heart of patriarchal systems: motherhood is simultaneously demanded and punished. Sethe is expected to reproduce future labour while being denied any authority over her children's survival. Her milk is stolen, her care criminalised, and her maternal love deemed excessive. This paradox is not unique to slavery; rather, it persists as a governing logic within contemporary political economy. Feminist economics identifies this phenomenon as the motherhood penalty, a structural condition in which women's economic value declines precisely because they perform reproductive and caregiving labour.

The concept is most rigorously articulated in the work of Claudia Goldin, whose research demonstrates that women's wages and career trajectories fall sharply after childbirth—not due to individual choice, but because labour markets are designed around uninterrupted, care-free workers. While Goldin's work focuses primarily on advanced economies, this thesis extends the motherhood penalty framework into postcolonial trade regimes, arguing that policies like AGOA actively intensify this penalty rather than mitigate it. In export-oriented economies, motherhood does not merely slow women's advancement; it renders them economically disposable.

This illustrates how this penalty materialises in African garment factories. Women workers—many of them mothers—are employed precisely because they are perceived as reliable yet replaceable. Pregnancy threatens job security, childcare responsibilities reduce flexibility, and illness linked to environmental exposure increases absenteeism. These conditions do not exist outside the economic model; they are produced by it. Much like Sethe, whose motherhood makes her vulnerable to punishment, contemporary women workers are penalised for the very care labour that sustains families and communities

Low wages further entrench the motherhood penalty. As documented in Lesotho's AGOA-supported apparel sector, women earn wages insufficient to meet basic needs, forcing them to stretch care across impossible margins. Some mothers are compelled to leave children in rural villages while working in cities; others rely on unsafe water sources contaminated by factory waste to cook, clean, and bathe their infants. These conditions lead to chronic illness, undernourishment, and intergenerational harm. Morrison's insight—that slavery turns love into danger—resonates here: motherhood becomes a site of continuous risk rather than security.

Morrison captures this structural trap with brutal clarity when she writes that "unless carefree, motherlove was a killer." Under slavery, maternal care becomes a liability rather than a protection; love intensifies risk instead of mitigating it. Sethe's decision to kill her child emerges not from excess affection but from a system that makes safe motherhood impossible. This insight resonates powerfully with contemporary trade regimes, where mothers are penalised for caregiving, punished for pregnancy, and forced to choose between employment and survival. Motherhood, in both contexts, is transformed into a site of danger rather than security.

The document also reveals how economic precarity intersects with sexual vulnerability, producing another dimension of the motherhood penalty.

Supervisors' demands for sexual compliance in exchange for overtime or job retention place women's bodily autonomy at constant risk. For mothers, refusal can mean unemployment and hunger for their children. The resulting spread of HIV among women garment workers in Lesotho is not incidental; it is a predictable outcome of trade systems that commodify women's labour while externalising the costs of care, health, and survival. Feminist IR names this everyday economic violence—harm that is structurally produced yet rendered invisible by policy language

Crucially, AGOA's policy design fails to recognise motherhood as an economic variable. Gender provisions, where present, are non-binding; labour rights enforcement is weak; and care responsibilities are treated as private matters rather than structural constraints. When AGOA expired in 2025, the threat of factory closures and job losses once again fell disproportionately on women, particularly mothers, who lacked savings, social protection, or alternative employment. This mirrors the logic Morrison exposes in *Beloved*: systems that depend on women's care will abandon them the moment profitability or political convenience demands it.

By placing Morrison's maternal critique alongside feminist economics, this thesis argues that the motherhood penalty is not an unfortunate side effect of trade—it is a design feature. Just as slavery extracted value from Sethe's reproductive labour while denying her maternal authority, contemporary trade regimes extract value from women's labour while penalising them for caregiving. The ghost that haunts *Beloved* thus reappears as a structural presence within global markets, reminding us that until care is recognised as labour and motherhood as political, economic justice will remain unattainable.

The Clearing and Collective Resistance: From Maternal Healing to Feminist Trade Reimagining

In *Beloved*, Morrison offers the Clearing as the novel's most radical counterpoint to patriarchal violence. Unlike the plantation or the haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road, the Clearing is a space of collective presence, where Black women gather to reclaim bodies long denied autonomy.

Baby Suggs' sermons do not ask for forgiveness or restraint; instead, they demand embodied affirmation—laughter, crying, dancing, shouting. In this space, women are instructed to love their flesh, their hands, their backs, and their hearts. The Clearing thus represents a political vision of healing that does not erase trauma but confronts it communally, refusing isolation as the cost of survival.

Baby Suggs functions not only as a spiritual leader but as a maternal political educator. Her insistence that formerly enslaved people love their flesh is a direct refusal of systems that have treated their bodies as expendable resources. By teaching women to reclaim their backs, breasts, hands, and hearts, she articulates an alternative economy of care—one not organised around extraction, productivity, or punishment. In this sense, the Clearing becomes a site where motherhood is reimagined as collective strength rather than individual sacrifice.

This logic of collective resistance culminates when thirty women, led by Ella, gather outside 124 to banish Beloved. Their voices—chanting, praying, calling—interrupt the private enclosure of Sethe's suffering. Importantly, it is not an individual act of heroism that expels the ghost, but collective maternal solidarity. The women arrive not as judges but as witnesses, recognising that isolation has allowed the haunting to grow. The act of coming together becomes an intervention against a system that thrives on separating women from one another, much like slavery once fragmented families and contemporary trade fragments labour into invisible units.

Denver's transformation following this moment marks the forward-looking political significance of the Clearing. When she steps beyond the haunted house and declares, *"This is my mama, and we're building a life together,"* she signals a shift from survival through endurance to survival through connection. Denver's movement outward—toward work, community, and shared responsibility—suggests that healing requires structural engagement, not retreat. Morrison thus refuses a purely symbolic resolution; the novel ends not with erasure of violence, but with a commitment to rebuilding life within a damaged world.

Read through a feminist International Relations lens, the Clearing offers a model for rethinking global political economy. Just as slavery's violence could not be undone through individual escape alone, the gendered harms of contemporary trade regimes cannot be resolved through isolated policy tweaks or corporate social responsibility narratives. Systems like AGOA rely on the fragmentation of women's labour, treating each worker as replaceable, voiceless, and economically isolated. The Clearing counters this logic by insisting that women's experiences must be aggregated, voiced, and treated as politically authoritative.

Applied to trade policy, this vision demands a shift from abstract indicators of growth to story-based accountability. Women's narratives of low wages, environmental poisoning, workplace coercion, and maternal precarity must be recognised as evidence of policy failure rather than unfortunate side effects. The same way the women's chanting disrupts the hold of Beloved, collective testimony can disrupt the moral legitimacy of trade regimes that claim development while reproducing harm. This is not sentimentality; it is structural critique grounded in lived reality.

The Clearing also gestures toward a reparative framework rather than a purely compensatory one. In the novel, healing does not come from restoring what was lost—no child is returned, no scars erased—but from acknowledging historical violence and restructuring communal relations. This insight resonates with contemporary global calls to recognise slavery as a crime against humanity and to address its economic afterlives. Trade regimes that benefit from centuries of extracted labour cannot meaningfully pursue gender equity without confronting these historical debts. Reparative justice, in this sense, is not backward-looking; it is a necessary condition for ethical future policy.

For AGOA and similar trade frameworks, a "Clearing approach" would require binding gender equity clauses, enforceable labour protections, environmental accountability, and the inclusion of women workers—especially mothers—in policy design and evaluation. It would mean recognising care work, health, and reproductive labour as economic variables rather than private burdens. Most importantly, it would require abandoning the fiction that markets are neutral spaces, acknowledging instead that trade is a social system shaped by power, history, and embodied inequality.

Morrison ends *Beloved* by reminding readers that the story is "not a story to pass on," even as it risks being forgotten. The Clearing stands as a warning against forgetting and a blueprint for resistance. Until global trade systems embrace collective responsibility and reckon with their dependence on women's extracted labour, the haunting will persist. Like Beloved herself, the consequences of unaddressed violence will continue to return—demanding recognition, justice, and transformation.

CONCLUSION: WHEN THE GHOST DOES NOT LEAVE

This thesis has argued that *Beloved* is not only a novel about the past but a theory of the present. Through Sethe's stolen milk, Morrison reveals a system in which Black women's reproductive and productive capacities are treated as endlessly extractable resources. That logic does not end with emancipation; it merely changes form. What begins at Sweet Home plantation reappears in export-processing zones, garment factories, and trade agreements that rely on women's labour while denying them security, dignity, and care. The violence does not disappear—it relocates.

Across this study, the continuity has been unmistakable. The milk taken from Sethe's body becomes the labour taken from women's hands. The whip that carved the chokecherry tree into Sethe's back becomes poisoned rivers, dust-filled factory floors, poverty wages, and bodies worn down by twelve-hour shifts. The Schoolteacher who claimed ownership over flesh is replaced by factory supervisors, brand contracts, and policy frameworks that insist development is being delivered even as women remain trapped in survival. The form has changed; the rule has not.

The analysis of trade regimes reveals that African women's bodies remain the cheapest element in the supply chain. Women leave their villages because there is no work, enter factories because there is no alternative, and accept wages that cannot sustain life because refusal risks starvation. Some are forced to trade sex for overtime or job security. Many raise children with contaminated water, breathe toxic air, and bury co-workers month after month. These are not unfortunate by-products of trade; they are the costs that make trade profitable. Like Sethe, these women are punished not for failing the system, but for trying to survive within it.

What Morrison names through *rememory* is the refusal of violence to remain buried. The ghost in *Beloved* returns because the conditions that produced her were never dismantled. Similarly, global trade policies that claim progress without addressing gendered extraction reproduce the same haunting. Development discourse insists on forgetting, on calling exploitation opportunity, on treating women's suffering as collateral rather than constitutive. Yet the body remembers. The labouring body remembers. The maternal body remembers.

This thesis has also shown that solutions cannot be individual. Sethe cannot outrun the system alone. Healing does not arrive through silence or endurance. It emerges only when women come together—when voices replace isolation, when testimony disrupts denial. The Clearing offers a political vision in which collective recognition becomes resistance. It is not a return to innocence, but a demand for accountability. The same principle must guide international economic systems. Trade cannot continue to function as if women's lives are external to its calculations.

Until global trade stops treating women's bodies as expendable, *Beloved* will continue to walk. She walks from plantation to factory, from stolen milk to sewing needle, from one afternoon of violence to a lifetime of low wages, illness, and loss. She walks because the system still believes her body belongs to someone else. And as long as trade policies are written without listening to the women whose lives sustain them, the haunting will not end.

This, finally, is the intervention of this thesis: to insist that motherhood, labour, and survival are not peripheral to international relations, but foundational to it. To read *Beloved* as a warning that economic systems built on forgetting will always be haunted. And to argue that until justice is made structural—until care is valued, labour protected, and voices heard—the ghost will remain. Not as memory. But as consequence.

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