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M.A. Thesis Proposal:  
Reconstructing Slave Identity

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## Introduction

Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil.

(Morrison 2)

Meet Sethe, the runaway slave and mother portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Desperate not to see her daughter enslaved, Sethe commits infanticide, killing her baby in order to save her from a fate worse than death. This act of violence is highly controversial and is interpreted in various ways in the novel: Sethe perhaps did not want to harm her child but is moved by a sense of love and devotion towards her daughter to rescue her from slavery; she can find no escape other than to free her through death. Another possible interpretation is that Sethe deliberately murders an unwanted child. This explanation calls to mind Sethe's own mother, who murdered all of her children except of Sethe: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man," Sethe is told by Nan, one of the many characters in the text reeling from the horrors of slavery (36). *Beloved* offers a promise of rebirth and redemption, acceptance, grace and recovery from past traumas through reconciliation between mother and daughter.

“Never before was a former slave elevated to the status of the sultan’s lawful spouse, much to the astonishment of observers in the palace and in the city” (Mansel 86). The name of Hürrem Sultan, or Roxolana, is associated with the legendary queen of the Ottoman Empire. She was, perhaps, the most influential woman of her time. Yet, scholars hardly ever mention that Hürrem Sultan, Roxolana, and Anastasja Lisowska were different names for the same sixteenth-century woman born in the town of Rohatyn in Western Ukraine. Enslaved and kidnapped from her homeland at the age of fifteen, Roxolana made her way from the lowly status of a harem slave to the pinnacle of rule in her adopted country, attaining freedom, power, respect and influence over her husband Suleiman the Magnificent and their subjects. Roxolana’s story is a narrative of captivity, struggle and reclaimed ownership over her freed self and power for her progeny.

Both Sethe’s tale in Morrison’s *Beloved* and Roxolana’s story as told in historical fiction by Pavlo Zahrebelnyi offer accounts of motherhood informed by slavery. Sethe and Roxolana are fierce, perhaps even terrifying mothers who are liberated from slavery but transformed by their ordeals of escape. In the proposed thesis, I will create a comparative framework for reading Morrison’s literary representation of African-American slavery against the story of Ottoman royal bondage experienced by Ukrainian native Anastasja Lisowska, as depicted in Pavlo Zahrebelnyi’s novel *Roxolana*.

## **Aims and General Description**

The proposed thesis will compare the protagonists of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Roxolana* by Pavlo Zahrebelnyi. Both texts portray enslaved mothers. *Beloved* depicts a woman at the bottom of the social hierarchy who attempts to reconcile with the spirit of a daughter she killed while still a slave. *Roxolana* tells the story of the sixteenth-century Ottoman royal consort Hürrem Sultan, also known as Roxolana, a concubine who became the legal wife of the Ottoman sultan. In Zahrebelnyi's historical novel, Roxolana is brought to the Ottoman court from her native Ukraine as a sex slave imprisoned in the royal harem. In this thesis I will explore these two novels from the perspective of women deprived of their human rights and freedom, eager to fight for their liberation.

Four central themes structure my investigation: First, the thesis will examine the idea of escape from slavery. Second, it will compare how two different slavery systems, Ottoman bondage and African-American slavery, inform Roxolana's and Sethe's stories. Third, I will explore the role of a mother deprived of her individual rights, although determined to regain them — I am particularly interested in explaining how motherhood may function in terms of self-liberation and self-perception. Finally, I will explore the stages of transformation of the slave identity, examining the possibility of moral recovery from the past trauma and regaining ownership over this freed self.

Using the texts mentioned above and referring to appropriate critical sources, I will explore the circumstances and effects of Sethe's escape in comparison with Roxolana's desire to stay within the Ottoman Empire. Sethe commits infanticide in order to free her child from slavery, while Roxolana, though still in bondage, gives birth to children who become scions of Ottoman rule. She uses her role as a mother to strengthen her position in Suleiman's court.

## **Methodology**

My research is based on the comparative reading of two novels, focusing on the phenomena of slavery, escape, motherhood, and personal liberation. Narrative in these texts is used as a tool of reproducing and transforming a socio-political vision of a slave woman in an international arena. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is based on a real story of a runaway African slave mother's infanticide, committed to protect her child from slavery. This act of violence, however, could be interpreted as an achievement of self-authority and freedom. Similarly, Roxolana is an historical figure, a girl from Ukraine, kidnapped and made a harem slave; nevertheless, she is capable of attaining authority over her self through the power of will, energy and aspiration. As literary characters, Sethe and Roxolana go through different processes of transformation. Roxolana, as opposed to Sethe, was born free, although forced to work hard as a serf, in order to provide for herself and her family. Later on, she is kidnapped, captured and enslaved. Thus, Roxolana transforms from a free person to the Ottoman harem slave, while Sethe attains her freedom, escaping to Cincinnati.

## **Scholarly and Critical Background**

### 1. The Eastern European vision of Roxolana

Roxolana's image as a slave is controversial and contested, raising questions regarding her sudden and seemingly miraculous elevation to Sultan Suleiman's legal spouse. Captured by Tatars during their raid in Rohatyn in Western Ukraine, Anastasja was kidnapped and taken first to Caffa (Crimea) and then to Constantinople, where she was enslaved in the Ottoman imperial harem. She soon began her long road from a harem slave to legal spouse of the reigning sultan, adapting to a new regime and finally exerting power and influence over Suleiman I, the Magnificent. Galina Yermolenko explains the phenomenal rise of Roxolana, providing valuable context to my research on the literary adaption of her ascent in Zahrebelnyi's novel. Yermolenko provides context for Zahrebelnyi's fictional account by examining Roxolana's image through contemporary diplomatic correspondence, national Ukrainian and Polish legends, and Suleiman's letters to Roxolana. These sources emphasize Roxolana's intelligence, iron will, diplomatic talent, and beauty that helped her survive and even revolutionize the order of the Ottoman harem.

In researching *Roxolana*, I will refer to the work of Olena Apanovich, Irena Knysh, Julia Kristeva and other scholars who investigate the figure of Roxolana from a literary and historical perspective. Scholars discuss Roxolana's transformation from a slave to a national heroine capable of preserving love for her native country as well as protecting Ukraine during the period of Ottoman raids. Roxolana is a complex figure. She is a diplomat in the palace, capable of controlling the sultan and inspiring loyalty, pity, and fear. The "Eastern European (mostly Polish and Ukrainian) perspective on Roxolana defends her actions as necessary for her survival in the Ottoman slavery system" (Yermolenko 3).

### 2. Infanticide as a mode of liberation

What is a slave mother? Can she attain legal possession of her children? Can Sethe's decision to cut her baby's throat be justified and viewed as an attempt to rescue her daughter from a life that is worse than death? To answer these questions, I will analyze motherhood in *Beloved* under the constraints of slavery in light of literary criticism by Terry Paul Caesar, Andrew Levy, James Berger, Mabel Khawaja, Jon-Christian Suggs, Jean Wyatt, Marianne Hirsch and other critics, who have provided rich and varied materials on this topic.

Caesar mainly refers to contemporary feminist theorists, explaining *Beloved* as "a reading of maternal subjectivity" (2). He addresses questions relevant to my research: "What is a mother? Does motherhood compel a woman to be divided against herself? What does the representation of a mother as a slave reveal about any mother's status as a subject in her own right?" (ibid.).

Drawing on Hirsch's work about mothers and daughters, Caesar suggests that motherhood and slavery can be related: "If motherhood and slavery are equatable, then a mother can feel she is, exactly, a slave to her daughter, just as a daughter can to her mother. Furthermore, a mother can conceivably kill a child in order to protect her own self-possession, because she feels enslaved by her, and not only because she would save the child from slavery" (4).

Of valuable impact to this research is a study by Levy, who suggests that infanticide in the novel induces the characters to define their lost selves; infanticide becomes "the event that inspires the efforts of Morrison's characters, and Morrison herself, to seek what Barbara Christian calls "trajectories of self-definition"- ways of telling the story of self" (3), thus perceiving their actions and motives retroactively, through the same story told from different perspectives and by multiple narrators.

## **Chapter Outline**

My thesis will consist of an introduction, two chapters, and a conclusion, focusing on the idea of escape from African-American slavery system and an attempt to transform the existing regime of Ottoman bondage.

### **Introduction**

The main purpose of the introduction is to present relevant theoretical material about the prototypes of the protagonists, portrayed in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Roxolana* by Pavlo Zahrebelnyi. It is important to note that both novels are based on the real stories of women who had become victims of slavery regimes and challenged the concept of slavery. In this section, I will also present the aspects of the main argument that will appear in the succeeding chapters, putting the novels in conversation with each other. The argument will be focused on the idea of escape from slavery and struggle with two different slavery systems. I will also take up the role of motherhood in terms of self-liberation, as well as focus on the stages of transformation of the slave identity.

### **Chapter One: Beloved by Toni Morrison**

*Beloved* presents a retroactive narration created by multiple characters, trying to tell the unspeakable story of past trauma. Sethe, being the central narrator, tells the story of her life. This is a narrative of escape and infanticide, constructed of pieces of painful reminiscences. Only one person can inspire Sethe to tell the truth — her resurrected daughter Beloved, who has come back to Sethe after eighteen years of separation: first in the form of a spiteful ghost and then transformed into a beautiful young woman.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore Sethe's escape from slavery and the various motives which could have forced her to commit infanticide. The only possible option to perceive Sethe's story is to watch the development of her relationship with Beloved that goes

through the stages of recognition, mutual nurturing, healing, and acceptance of the necessity to separate when the relationship becomes toxic and destructive.

## **Chapter Two: Roxolana by Pavlo Zahrebelnyi**

*Roxolana* is a story of an extraordinary woman who experiences dramatic rises and falls, poverty and bondage, as well as elevation and power. What is her secret? How does a fifteen-year-old girl make her way from the lower strata of the harem system to the leadership of the whole Ottoman Empire? Roxolana must rebuild herself and be born anew from the degraded social position of a sex slave in order to survive in the Ottoman bondage.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Roxolana's transformation from a free person to a slave, and then from a slave to the legal spouse of Suleiman. Additionally, it's important to present the inner order of sexual power in the Ottoman harem with attention to the role of a Christian woman forced to accept an alien religion and culture. Furthermore, this chapter will focus on the role and power of a mother, describing the strategy of self-liberation through motherhood.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion will serve as a summary of the argument and supporting material. I will discuss the themes of slavery and escape, motherhood as a mode of liberation, and transformation of the slave identity.

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