

MOTHERHOOD IN TONI MORRISON A MERCY

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood provides them with essential skills and character to be good to provide something which someone can use. Morrison can understand the imaginary impact of suffering on these Black mothers depicted by the writer in her novels. A Mercy, the concept of motherhood is expanded to include more than the traditional bonds between mothers and daughters. Mother love acquires a different bond in this novel blood relation to a different connect between all female characters. Motherhood in her novel is individual with a broken spirit and shattered self. It is not an easy but a strained relationship between mother and child.

Keywords: Motherhood, black mothers, A Mercy, Toni Morrison.

INTRODUCTION

Mothering is a central issue for feminist theory. Motherhood is a persistent presence in the work of Toni Morrison. Morrison builds upon black women's experiences in terms of both maternal identity and role.

Motherhood is one of the most difficult jobs there is. It marks a new chapter in every woman's story. It gives you a new strength in yourself, something you didn't know was there until you had children. It also gives you a new sense of purpose and meaning in life. You encounter a love and passion for your children that you've never experienced before.

Motherhood is emotional. It's labeling yourself as a mom and sometimes forgetting who you really are, who you were before these beautiful babies arrived. Sometimes it can make you feel like your only job is to change diapers and do laundry all day. And as much love as we have for our children, sometimes motherhood leaves us with an aching for things greater than what lies outside the walls of our home.

Motherhood, in Morrison's view, is fundamentally and profoundly an act of resistance, essential and integral to black women's fight against racism, sexism and their ability to achieve well-being for themselves and their culture. The power of motherhood and the empowerment of mothering pave the way for the better world.

In her novels, Morrison shows the complexity of black women's experiences as mothers. Linda Wagner-Martin has analysed several of Morrison's fictions and she argues that: "the authors variations in drawing the roles of mothers, as well as the outcomes of that mothering in the equally varied characters of children, provide necessary critical information" Morrison goes beyond the stereotypical image of African-American women as impeccable mothers, while at the same time challenging the notion that motherhood deteriorates women. Although the portrayal of black mothers as mighty can be empowering for women, there is a tendency to romanticize black women's maternal experiences, which confines women to be exemplary mothers. Carole Boyce Davies argues that, in the

past, there has been “a need in black cultures to affirm black motherhood and/or to construct an essentialized mother as a strategic response to racist constructs... this affirmation becomes too defining and limiting for women”.

Morrison’s novels break away from labels that essentialize women’s experiences as mothers to depict the different experiences of the characters. In fact, black mothers are often depicted as having an ambivalent nature. This idea dangerously equates motherhood with womanhood, because it implies that women are only complete as mothers. Thus, motherhood is often seen through the lens of a biological imperative that considers women to have a maternal instinct and desire to be mothers. This perspective tends to idealize motherhood, and when applied to the experiences of black women in the context of slavery and its aftermath, leads to the erroneous picture of the black mother as completely selfless, or as astoundingly cruel or dominant.

Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s A Mercy

In Morrison’s A Mercy, Florens’s mother experiences the confining contradictions imposed on black mothers during slavery and the lack of opportunity to explain her actions. Florens and her mother initially belong to D’Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. Jacob goes to D’Ortega’s plantation to receive his payment, but

“it became clear what D’Ortega had left to offer. Slaves” (A M 21)

D’Ortega insists that Jacob should take a slave as payment, but Jacob is hesitant because slaves are not goods he trades in. But near the house, Florens’s mother catches Jacob’s attention: “He saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D’Ortega would refuse, he said, ‘Her. That one. I’ll take her’ (A M 23-24). Jacob describes Florens’s mother, who is a house slave quite valuable to D’Ortega. He answers: “Ah, no. Impossible. My wife won’t allow. She can’t live without her” (A M 24). Jacob perceives from his reaction that “There was more than cooking D’Ortega stood to lose” (A M 24). It is implied that Florens’s mother is abused by D’Ortega and, for that reason; she is kept around the house. Although D’Ortega says his wife cannot live without her, it is he that wants her close. Interrupting the conversation between both male characters, the narrator describes the scene of Florens and her mother:

The little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman’s shoes... The woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice is barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency. “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter.(A M 26)

In an act that surprises Jacob, the woman offers her own daughter to be taken away. Because of this event, Jacob misinterprets Florens’s mother’s actions, describing Florens as the: “ ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away ”. (A M 34)

Like his peers, he has a distorted view of motherhood that sees black mothers as cruel and detached. This assumption benefits Jacob, because it releases him of any guilt for his action of buying a young girl and, thus, depriving the little girl of her mother’s company. Florens’s mother is judged through the lenses of a white male who fails to understand the reality of black women during slavery. He conveniently portrays Florens’s mother as monstrous and convinces himself that he is doing Florens a favor by taking her away from this unnatural mother. Jacob thinks to himself that the “Acquisition...Could be seen as a rescue” (A M 34)

However, later in the novel, Florens's mother has the chance to tell her story and shed light on her actions. This is possible because she narrates the last chapter herself. She tells the story from her viewpoint as if speaking directly to her daughter:

"You wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye" (A M 166)

Despite Florens's mother's attempts to keep her as a child as long as possible, she is worried because D'Ortega started to notice her daughter. She knows that if Florens stays, she is doomed to have the same fate as herself: to be abused and to serve the sexual needs of her white master. She continues to explain her actions: "One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference". (A M 166)

In Morrison's fictions, motherhood becomes a fluid and complexly-developed experience. Similar to *A Mercy*, the novel *Sula* can be said to: "problematize the mother rather than romanticize her". The novel challenges the notion that all black women are inherently good and nurturing mothers, or even if such a concept is possible. In *Sula*, different forms of motherhood illustrate the complexity of the experience of black mothers in a post-slavery society.

In *A Mercy*, the concept of motherhood is expanded to include more than the traditional biological bonds between mothers and daughters. As common to African-American literature, mothers can be represented through grandmothers, friends, and even neighbours. *A Mercy*, Lina, a Native American slave, comes to represent a surrogate mother for Florens. The mother as the main person responsible for the child is actually a notion of modern society, as the nuclear family becomes reduced and the community is separated from the process of mothering.

In *A Mercy*, Lina becomes a surrogate mother for Florens, as they long to care and be cared for. Both characters are separated from their families at a very early age. As discussed earlier, Florens is sold to Jacob. She is separated from her mother while still a child and longs for a mother figure. Lina, while also a child, is one of the few Native American survivors of a plague in her village. French soldiers find her hiding up a tree and take her to a Presbyterian village nearby. There, she suffers discrimination and abuse because she is Native American. When she refuses to be a victim and reacts, she is marginalized and expelled from every household, being forced to live outside, along with animals. When Jacob visits the town, he takes Lina, who is already older, but still longs to find another family. Although Lina manages to survive by herself, she desires to have family connections as she once had as a child.

Lina is not Florens's biological mother or a relative; yet, she becomes a surrogate mother to Florens. Not limited to relatives, othermothers help women cope with the loss of their biological mothers, which was a common pattern in slavery. Patricia Hill Collins also adopts the term othermothers to widely refer to women bonds among black women that help them survive and shape their subjectivities. The term othermother is adopted in this article, and its meaning is extended beyond that of black women, to include women of color, as is the case with Lina. She can be seen as an othermother to Florens, because despite their differences, a mother-daughter bond marks their relationship and together they resist the paradigms of a slave holding society that ruptures women's bonds. Lina and Florens meet when Jacob brings Florens to the farm. As soon as she arrives in Jacob's farm, Lina is absorbed with feelings of care, as she: "had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow"(A M 60)

Florens mentions with delight, “Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth” (A M 8)

Immediately, both sympathize with each other. They slowly become more involved with one another: “they had memorable nights, lying tighter, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina’s stories” (A M 61) and their relationship is gradually strengthened. Florens feels safe in her arm and “would sigh then, her head on Lina’s shoulder and when sleep came the little girl’s smile lingered”. (A M 63)

Lina comforts her, and they begin to love and trust each other. Florens likes to hear Lina’s stories, but the one she loves most are always those about maternal bonds: “especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters”. (A M 61)

She admires protective mothers who struggle to ensure the survival of their children by keeping them close. Florens longs for the same kind of bond, because she erroneously believes her mother offered her to Jacob out of lack of love. As an othermother, Lina tries to help Florens through love and care. When Florens is alone, she constantly misses Lina and needs her. While on an errand to get the blacksmith to save Jacob’s wife from an illness, Florens longs for Lina’s guidance: “I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness”. (A M 42)

As her othermother, Lina represents the wisdom and knowledge that Florens needs. While alone, Florens misses “sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina”. (A M. 6). Like a daughter who carefully listens to her mother’s advice, Florens makes constant reference to Lina’s teachings: “Lina says... not all natives are like her... so watch out”. (A M 5)

She tries to remember things that she learned with Lina so she will be able to survive on her own in the woods. Florens and Lina are in need of love, as they are trying to survive in a society that has lacerated their family bonds. The narrator states that “the mother hunger—to be one or have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone”. (A M. 63)

Both feel the need to have a mother-daughter bond to survive under the cruel realities of slavery. By cultivating mutual feelings of love and respect, both characters cope with their previous traumas of abandonment and loss. As Lina and Florens perform the roles of mother and daughter, respectively, it can be argued that “the concept of motherhood cannot be reduced to a biological function”, especially in a slaveholding society.

CONCLUSION

Morrison’s *A Mercy*, novel that challenge conventional portrayals of motherhood. The analysis of different forms of motherhood suggests that there is no fairy tale or an idealized story about mothers in these novels. The comparative analysis of Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy* illustrates the complexity of motherhood, challenging stereotype black mothers beyond biological determinants. This study destabilizes patterns that classify black women characters as simply mother-like or not mother-like. Black mothers cannot be simply judged as good or bad. The various realities of the women characters show the heterogeneous experiences of motherhood under slavery and in post-slavery society. In such a context, motherhood is not limited to biological connections. Different

women come to play the roles of mothers and other mothers. In Morrison's *A Mercy*, motherhood reflects the many possible manifestations of such bonds during slavery and in its aftermath.

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