

Redefining Love, Maternal Abandonment, and Unconventional Motherhood in Toni Morrison's works

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Abstract

One of Toni Morrison's most well-known themes in her writing is motherhood, which she emphasises in both her essays and novels. Morrison tries to demolish the patriarchal poster image of a mother and the experience of motherhood by philosophising on the power and sacrifices that come with being a mother through the thematic exploration of her stories. Building on this, she skilfully weaves together her political position on black women, her thoughts on slavery, and its legacy in the United States in relation to the countless challenges associated with motherhood identity. A humble attempt has been made to elucidate how Toni Morrison challenges the conventional wisdom and conventional motherly norms by dissecting her works "*Sula*," "*A Mercy*," and "*Beloved*." Morrison writes boldly on subjects that her peers have rarely avoided or abandoned. She addresses various aspects of black femininity, tracing their development from ordinary experiences to the emergence of fresh forms of resistance. African American women are given the opportunity to speak up, refute, and confront the conversation surrounding black womanhood by her characters.

As women's conventional roles are reinforced and they are romanticised, different eras give rise to different expectations. Therefore, it becomes crucial for voices like Morrison's to uplift women everywhere by presenting the complexity of societal validation in an innocent manner. She rejects, for instance, the widely held belief that moms are the exclusive realm of biological mothers.

Keywords: Motherhood, Hunger, Love, Slavery, Resistance, Identity.

Introduction

Morrison examines the diverse ways in which love is expressed in the many moms in her stories by focussing on friendship, empathy, and motherhood as themes. She forces the readers to reconsider what a typical 'good mother' is in "*Sula*." The writing is emotionally intense, and the characters exude genuine emotion even though this is the author's second book. The lack of punctuation in the prose represents the plot's urgency. One of her best-known works, "*Beloved*," has a protagonist who is a slave lady who kills her own daughter to get her "where she was safe" after fleeing from her master. These audacious yet relatable

plots captivate readers and inspire them to consider the strength and bravery required to be a mother.

“And the eggs?” she asks.
 “They hatch alone,” says Lina.
 “Do they live?” Florens’ whispering is urgent.
 “We have,” says Lina
 — (A Mercy 98)

Morrison gives voice to the voiceless, the unsung, and the unknown by recounting stories centred on intra-feminine communities, the institutions of oppression they created, and the repressive effects these institutions had on experiences that are peculiar to gender. Forlorn paternal love and secluded children show powerful, dominant, and interesting characters with familial bonds tied to their dictatorial pasts.

Through an in depth reading of *A Mercy*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*, one can dissect the complex role that mothers play. Morrison creates a different imaging of a mother, despite the fact that we are trained to create a conventional image of one. She clarifies through her work that mothers are more than just ideas of compassion and love. In an attempt to show readers that there are no fairy tales or happy endings for the mothers in these works, this study carefully examines how the stories of Hannah, Eva, Rebekka, Lina, and Florens' mother subvert the conventional conventions of motherhood. Rather, it gracefully accepts the moms' fragility in light of their constant vulnerability and deeply rooted prejudices that aim to undermine them.

Toni Morrison's ability to deconstruct intricate and contentious issues without sacrificing their authenticity has made her a leading figure in Black Feminist writing. While multifaceted, there is a close relationship between feminism and motherhood. For a long time, motherhood has been portrayed in literature as a typical adult duty of women in a predominantly patriarchal culture. Morrison's narratives celebrate the reconstruction of the "mother" from a limited biological classification into a self-sufficient persona, connecting her genuine decolonisation from male authority to unrestricted and unconventional parenting. An examination of Morrison's narratives allows us to comprehend this notion in a similar way. Motherhood is shown in *Sula* and *A Mercy* as representing the range of expressions and effects of different relationships both during and after slavery. Morrison uses various sets of moms and daughters to illustrate these manifestations. *A Mercy* and *Sula's* narrative revolves around mother-daughter pairs, motherless daughters, and daughterless mothers. In the process of delving into this, Morrison also applies a rich shade of motherhood to the novel, which is woven together by a diverse cast of characters and their stories.

In ‘*A Mercy*’ Florens' mother offers him to Jacob Vaark in exchange for her paying back their master's debt. When Florens gets there, there are three other women living in the Vaark home. The mistress, Rebekka; her faithful slave, Lina; and the incompetent slave, Sorrow. Morrison delves at the differences between race and slavery in this book. She makes an effort to address and clarify the division between slaves who were brought into the country and those who were born and raised there. Literally speaking, "*A Mercy*" is a mother's request for pardon, a prayer for survival, and hope for a brighter tomorrow. The way that one narrative is interwoven and entwined with the others progressively informs the reader of similar themes

and class differences. The narrative breaks down the notion of motherhood as it moves from one character to the next. Morrison begs the readers to realise that motherhood is not a binary experience and most definitely isn't compared to the clichés that have been attached to it for ages. It is just as subtle and dynamic as the ladies who either have it or want for it. Morrison also skilfully creates a sense of unity amongst these women, regardless of their origins, ethnicity, class, or colour.

The protagonist, Nel, and two little girls who live at the Bottom are the subjects of *Sula's* narrative. Nel hails from a traditional and strict family, whereas Sula is an outgoing young woman from an odd family. The two girls share a terrible upbringing but find comfort in each other's company despite their divisive backgrounds. As they get older, Nel becomes a traditional mother, while Sula enjoys her wild individuality and doesn't get married. Sula, her mother, and her grandmother create the most unusual household one could imagine, with their blurred lines between right and wrong. The mystery around a "conventionally good mother" becomes more complex as we try to understand the motivations behind the individuals' actions. Morrison forces the audience to reconsider what a typical "good mother" means.

We meet Eva Peace, the largest matriarch of the "Bottom," in *Sula*. (The Bottom was the name given to the barren, unusable ground above the hills, which was mostly inhabited by Black people from Medallion, Ohio.) The most peculiar way that one can imagine a mother being described is how Eva Peace is portrayed.

From being a helpless mother who could do little to ensure her child's wellbeing, Eva Peace rises to a position of authority and decides to put an end to her child's suffering. Eva has three children: Plum, Pearl, and Hannah, one of whom she decides to part with. She succumbs to...."burning him to death to prevent his continued life of drug addiction,"(115) since her son never truly returned from the War. Rather, there was a sick boy who was hooked to heroin who lived with Eva for years. Neither could she endure her beloved son's quality of life nor could bring him back from the gates of death as she had done when he was a baby.

Eva was a victim of her environment, weighed down by prejudice and poverty to the point where she was unable to show her son and daughters any kind of affection or even the appearance of it. Eva's tone, which is harsh and violent, symbolises fierce and tough motherhood. Hannah queries Eva about her history of love, she says. "what you talkin' 'bout did I ever love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (132). With a husband who fled and the responsibility of raising her children, she had to select her battles. She decides to amputate her leg and fight for her children's lives, which is a unique sort of love. The depressing result was that she had little time to console the children or express her emotions to them.

Morrison's works depict mother-child interactions that are impacted by racism and slavery. The main character in *Beloved*, Sethe, is justified in killing her child by citing her "effort to love" in the face of a cruel oppressive system. Physical desertion is a typical occurrence in a world where slavery has corrupted society. Throughout *A Mercy*, both Florens and the reader are left with unanswered questions regarding her mother's abandonment of her. Florens exhibits feelings of betrayal, distrust, hatred, and contempt towards her mother's identity. She perceives her as a self-centred woman who prioritised her independence and that of her son

over that of her daughter. This is made clear when Florens claims, at one point, that even though the living conditions were worse, she felt more at ease sleeping with Lina than her mother. But her mother's true motives aren't revealed to us until the very end. Knowing that Jacob viewed her as a "human child," Florens' mother had sold her out and given her away rather than putting her own needs first. In a flash of nostalgia, she realised Florens would live a better life without her, away from that location where they were just black people being raped by white guys who were trying to "break them in." She says, that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal"(176).

The terrible act of infanticide committed by Sethe in *Beloved* exposes the poisonous effects of the oppression and tyranny that forces her to choose death over a lifeless existence. Sethe chooses to kill the kid she loves in order to save it, which makes her actions horrifying. The sequence in *Beloved* is eerie and chilly, reminiscent of the opposite of a comparable tragedy in *A Mercy*, whereby Florens' mother, who was also sexually assaulted by white plantation owners, gives and receives love from the victims of rape. In *Sula*, Eva states, "I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man"(132) as he never returned from that miserable War.

Surviving And Dying: The Concept of "Hunger"

Morrison writes freely about ideas that her peers have avoided or deviated from. She criticises the status quo and conventional motherly ideals. Helene Wright's mother was a prostitute in *Sula*. Ever since, Helene has taken on the role of a mother who is always pressuring her daughter, Nel to act in a specific manner in an attempt to extract whatever remnant of her grandmother's "personality" that she might have inherited. According to Morrison, "The mother calmed little Nel's enthusiasms until [Helene] drove her daughter's imagination underground."(215)

Although Helene Wright's actions may not have prescribed the characteristics of a typical mother, Morrison saw them as an example of the willingness to give up originality and innovation in order to gain acceptance from others and society at large.

Morrison's stories are filled with action, much of which stems from her straightforward rejection of the widely held belief that biological mothers are the exclusive bearers of motherhood. While Lina had not yet become a mother, she had personally experienced both deliverance and destruction at the hands of her own hands in *A Mercy*. Thus, Lina sees Florens as the kid she never had when he arrives. An orphan she wishes to raise and care for, someone who stands in for her history. Florens brought with it a feeling of belonging; she was hers, a kid to fill the vacuum left by her own wrecked youth and impoverished present. Sorrow and Rebekka did not embrace Florens's presence following the death of Patricia, their five-year-old daughter. At first, Rebekka perceived her as a representation or a farce of her own imperfect motherhood. However, she quickly turned into the bond that held them together. The bond that exists between Lina and Florens stems from their shared desire to find 'mother hunger.' Florens feeds on Lina's love since she is so hurt by her own mother's rejection. The force of this unfulfilled emotion drives Lina to kill Sorrow's firstborn by drowning it in the river. It stands in stark contrast to the traditional perception of a mother as

the giver of life rather than death. Thus, violence becomes a technique that these women—Eva in *Sula*, Sethe in *Beloved*, and Lina in *A Mercy*—use in all of these Morrison's novels.

Sorrow from *A Mercy* is an example of another nonconformist mother. Character Sorrow finds herself lost and shipwrecked, lost to people's and the world's ways. Instead of being bought, Jacob had accepted her. A thorn in Lina's side, she called her a misfit, bad luck, and once even accused her of being the reason behind Rebekka's miscarriages. She felt alone, even in this group of oddballs. It did her no favour, either, to be incapable of handling farm work and household chores. The two local women had already banded together in dismay by the time she arrived. A relationship where she had no place was between childless mothers who yearned for affection. It could also be explained by her lack of interest in parenthood and her lack of desire to mother or be mothered. Because of this, she is seen as an outsider among the group of women who are united by their shared hunger, a hunger that Sorrow lacks. Still, becoming a mother gives Sorrow new life—so much so that she calls herself Whole. It provides her with a goal. She is wary about allowing Lina to be the midwife because she worries Lina will harm her child and since she lost her first child. She was positively altered by the child, for the better. She has a renewed sense of survival instinct and wants to survive for her baby child. Her child is her top priority, and she refuses assistance from others since she needs to regain her self-confidence and trust before being abandoned in this harsh strange country. "Sorrow is a mother," as Lina puts it. Nothing more, nothing less. (234)

Morrison addresses the topic of maternal love in her writing and aims to understand the range of ways it can be harmful. "To be one or to have one"(245) is the only abstraction related to motherhood. In their own special ways, characters such as Lina, Rebekka, Hannah, Helene, Eva, and Sorrow try to be one. All of her characters fight with "to have one," and abandonment is defined by more than just the lack of a mother. Even when they are there the entire time, some mothers deny their kids of their maternal affection. Morrison refers to this need to be or have one as "Mother Hunger." They are all described as orphans by Lina in *A Mercy*, who adds, "and like all orphans they were insatiable."

This ghost of *minha mae*, (my mother), haunts Florens. This could be her mother's incarnation. She lacks the maternal instinct because her mother is not present in her life. She is so severely afflicted with mother hunger that her time with Maliak, the blacksmith's child, serves as a metaphor for her incapacity as a mother. At one point, she admits, "I'm scared of mothers who nurse greedy babies."(265). Her mother's absence throughout her early years prevented her from adopting the role of a motherly figure with Maliak. In her mind, he stands in for her brother. She contracts a distemper that infects her internally and stays with her eternally because her mother chose the brother over her.

All of the daughters in *Sula* had witnessed their mothers take care of their bodily needs and get what they needed, but there was no emotional reflection of these actions. The young girls have engaged in overt behaviour ever since they were in close emotional and physical proximity. The line "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers, they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" by Morrison alluded to this closeness. The protagonist and Nel are shown taunting white teenage males who bullied their black friends in one of the first few chapters. We first witness a dark side to the child's inner nature when Sula takes out a knife and mutilates her finger to frighten the boys away.

According to critics, this audacity might be seen as a brave gesture against institutionalised racism and injustice. She decides to hurt herself rather than confronting them and fighting to let them know that their pointless harassment is no match for her boldness and her ferocity. The emotional pain and personal detachment that the females experience on a regular basis throughout their childhood and adult lives culminate in the distance that we see in them. It is impossible to observe the girls' behaviour without seeing a mirror of their moms. As Sula grows up in a home where her mother does not actively participate in her upbringing, she is sheltered from any potential compassion and is imbued with a conviction to live an independent and experimental life.

Conclusion

These resilient and courageous women continue to be the protagonists of their stories despite the dangerous and turbulent storms they encounter. They give us storylines that are eerily powerful while wresting power away from their oppressors, both literally and figuratively. Regardless of their happy or tragic endings, each character's growth and metamorphosis offers a novel viewpoint on friendship, community, motherhood, and solidarity. "Thought-provoking ambivalence is a hall-mark of mothering," writes Sara Ruddick in her essay, "what we are pleased to call "mother-love" is intermixed with hate, sorrow, impatience, resentment, and despair."

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