ABSTRACT

The present study has examined the novels of three African American novelists – Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker vis-à-vis the concept of motherhood. Based on the critical exploration of the novels, efforts have been taken in this study to conceptualize each of these writers’ maternal theory which is rooted in and springs from the historical, racial, cultural, and political ideologies and practices related to mothering. It is proposed to study in the thesis the different dimensions of motherhood that range from assigned role play through socio-historically constructed entity (such as racio-cultural preserver and recreator) and strategy deviser (against intra- and inter-racial/social violence and aggression) to an independent being who rises above the restricting social and contextual demands (universal mother). The thesis, thus, intends to study the novels of Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker as expressions of motherhood and mothering practices. Such an expression ranges through a number of perspectives – mother as a social construct, as a matriarchaly groomed entity, a force receding from responsibility, a liberating agent, a benevolent crisis-manager, a teacher, a protector, a preserver of tradition and re-creator of root-culture, a figure of cultural wisdom, a self-effacing familial figure, a history-conscious saviour and so on.

All the novels of Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have been chosen for study. Gloria Naylor’s 1996, Toni Morrison’s Love, Alice Walker’s The Way Forward is With a Broken Heart and Now is the Time to Open Your Heart have been left out of the purview of the thesis as there is little scope in these novels for motherhood analysis. As Toni Morrison’s latest novel A Mercy (November 2008) has been available in Tamil Nadu, India only since March 2009, it has not been included for study in the discussion of the thesis.
The first chapter of the thesis discusses various theories on motherhood and the major theories of Sara Ruddick, Collins and Bell Hooks have been adopted as tool for a study of the chosen novels in this thesis. It highlights the socio-political status of Black Women in Africa and in America since slavery. It also states the hypothesis and gives an account of chapterisation.

The second chapter of the thesis discusses the novels of Gloria Naylor to identify the role of mother figures and the various possible mothering styles that include nurturing, healing and strategy framing and training. It highlights the way in which Gloria Naylor asserts the importance of community mothers who are responsible for transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another. This chapter also examines how Naylor places emphasis on the importance of community mothers’ responsibility in healing both the physical and psychological ailment of the African American people. It views the significance and the richness of African American ideology of motherline as presented in the novels of Gloria Naylor.

The third chapter of the thesis analyses the novels of Toni Morrison and it highlights the maternal theory of Toni Morrison as revealed through her novels. This chapter showcases the negative impacts of the assimilation of western cultural concepts by the African American mothers. This chapter also studies how Toni Morrison deems it necessary to connect oneself with one’s own cultural heritage and how she portrays the significance of mother’s role in preserving the history of the black in America, in transmitting this history to the present and in preparing the children for facing the future with the knowledge of the past. It highlights Toni Morrison’s radical redefinition of the black mother who is not only a creator but also a destroyer. It also examines how Morrison’s novels plead for preserving the African cultural values and female bonding through mothering.
The fourth chapter analyses the maternal theory of Alice Walker as identified in her non-fictional work In Search of My Mother’s Garden and it also examines the novels of Alice Walker in order to highlight her views on African American and African Amerindian maternal practices. It emphasises Alice Walker’s vision of transcending the biological limitations in order to be and to become a universal mother. It also discusses Alice Walker’s narrative efforts to revive the Mother Goddess cult.

The final chapter discusses the major findings of the thesis.

In the Appendix I, a tabular representation of the chosen African American mothers, their mothering strategies, their success/failure and the reason for their success/failure in mother function have been presented. A distribution of African American mothers in terms of sets according to their roles has been presented as Venn diagram in Appendix II. A list of mother goddesses and gods relevant in the discussion of mothers and mothering function has been presented in Appendix III. And a synoptic account of African American Literature has been presented in Appendix IV.