“Take my Daughter, not me”: Mercy? in *A Mercy*.

To be a female in this world is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below.

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

Since loving is about knowing, we have more meaningful love relationships when we know each other and it takes time to know each other.

bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*

Toni Morrison’s art of depicting human relationships has enthralled the readers with its gamut of emotions moving from love and desire to hate, rivalry, dislike, disassociation, jealousy, abandonment and obsession. Surprisingly, the characters trapped in the net of these sensations and feelings are not necessarily opponents but human beings who are biologically related or maybe unrelated to each other, yet are not recognized as rivals. The most common representation to this nuance-layered link is given in mother-child relationships, and more specifically in the mother-daughter relationship.

Mothering and motherhood have been controversial topics of discussion in the area of feminist studies. They have been associated with women’s oppression as well as their empowerment. Although institutions of marriage and motherhood are various modes of a woman’s subjugation, her stance as a mother can still be seen as a source of power. Morrison’s reflections on mothering embody her strongest views on the strength of black women as mothers. Though black mother-daughter relationship cannot be studied without the knowledge of its racial and socio-cultural background, stories of Morrison’s fictions create an enriched but complex picture of motherhood. The intricacies of these bonds are displayed through their tests in difficult and unreliable situations where individuals are tested under atrocious situations created by
the slave culture. Biologically tied yet distanced, biologically unrelated and yet related- mothers and children in her stories project an unnatural and unconventional picture of emotional ties that can be explained and justly reasoned by an understanding of its background context. This chapter focuses upon such unusual displays of maternal love and desires which are caused by severed bonds imposed upon women and children by the cruel hands of slavery.

Toni Morrison uses her rich style to dramatize the densest period of history-1680- in her novel *A Mercy*. As in her previous novels, in this novel also, she focuses on the psycho-physical ravages of slavery borne by slaves in those times. More specifically, the stories are always an intense dramatization of the complexities of human relationships and particularly the ruptured mother-child relationships and distorted community relations. By these depictions and explorations of socio-cultural conditions during slavery, Morrison unfolds the true life of those who have suffered unknown and untold atrocities of slavery. The artistic fabric of the novel offers a diverse and intricate projection of relationships and encourages its readers to decipher their meaning and existence by presenting a social commentary. In other words, it can also be said that Morrison tries to evoke the readers’ feelings by offering her own perception of the society to question the glazed doctrines of white hegemonic society. Though the story of *A Mercy* is retrieved from the backyard of 1680s, the novel has a strong appeal to the contemporary times also.

Female characters in Morrison’s novels are often physically and emotionally scarred. They are subjugated by the white racial society and physically dishonoured and emotionally demeaned throughout their life. But the blows of slave society fail to crush their undaunted spirit. They always bear the burden quietly by surviving with their choices of basic survival that they make for themselves and their family, but which are not easily accepted and only denied in a racist society. Sometimes they veil their scars under their decision to choose their family and children’s welfare and survival. As a result of this, her protagonists often adopt violent practices which are seldom spoken and often corporal. This is also a manifestation of their self-devised way to defend themselves from further oppression. It also proves that violence has become a tool in the hands of these black women, and it helps them in articulating their anger against racial powers in strengthening them to combat horrors of slavery.
Morrison once remarked that *A Mercy* paints a picture of life before slavery. Her remark has received strong critical acclaim everywhere. She has not only explored the issues of race but has together worked upon the theme of gender, religion and location, to add a few, and she does it in a manner that reflects “an interface with cultural artifacts and foundational myths” (Stave, 1). Short in length but rich and dense, this fiction requires a deep critical reading for its meaningful and insightful exploration of critical issues.

The issue of race cannot be ignored by the readers of *A Mercy* because it pervades throughout the novel along with various other social determiners. The novel is a record of the tale of the journey of a Dutch trader, Jacob Vark, who has moved to the New World in search of wealthy prospects. At its centre, the novel dramatizes the story of an abandoned daughter- Florens- an African-American girl who is one of Jacob’s slaves. She joins Lina, a Native American girl, and stays as another female servant in the Vaark household. The third character in the scene is Sorrow. She is an African girl who is an epitome of pity and grief and lives without any identifiable heritage. Other than the master and his three servants, Jacob’s wife Rebekka also plays a major role in the story. Vaark wishes a wife, “a certain kind of mate: an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, liberate but not proud, independent but nurturing” (18). Rebekka is brought to the New World with the other people of her community due to some social problems in her community. For the prospects of settlement, she is ready to marry a man whom she has never seen in her life. But unfortunately, she has no prospects of happiness later in her life as a mother, because her three sons cannot see the light of day after their birth. Her only child who survives for a few days is her daughter who also dies by a horse kick. But her husband is still in the hope of a son.

There is a turn in the story when Vaark goes to meet Senohar De’ Ortega, a Portuguese merchant, to claim his money. But Ortega’s failure to pay in cash forces him to trade a female servant with Vaark in order to reap high profits. After a survey of a line of more than twenty slaves, he decides to take a woman with two children- a daughter and a son. But, to his dismay and shock, he finds that she offers her daughter Florens and pleads, “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take my daughter. Not me” (20). Jacob readily accepts the deal because he thinks Florens as a good companion in Rebekka’s
loneliness. The novel’s plot thus tries to script the struggle of these lonely women and their strife to survive in disruptive situations.

Morrison’s description of Signora De Ortega’s estate discloses the horrors and dread of slavery in a magnificent home and a huge farmhouse where slave trade is carried out successfully, specifically for women. Ortega does not miss any opportunity to supply human cargo. As shown in the novel, slavery is integral to the regions of Southern plantations where the soil is fertile for the growth of high value crops.

The invisible bond between the characters in the novel lies in their interaction as mothers, sisters and supporters. Wyatt Mason argues that in *A Mercy*, “the gravitational centre is the dead Jacob Vaark” (35). But a close reading of the text suggests that the power of human emotions arises from a strong portrayal of the women characters who occupy centre-stage in the story. The narrative voice throughout the text interchanges between the voice of the third-person omniscient narrator and Florens. It begins with an unusual revelation about Florens that she can read and write, in spite of the fact that she is a slave girl. It is through her voice that the other two characters- Lina and Sorrow- are introduced to the reader. There remains one character that is not referred to by her name- Florens’ mother. She is only mentioned as her mother, or “minha mae”, the word that the daughter learns from some conversation of their Portuguese master with the other people in his house.

Andrea O’Reilley discusses motherhood as a site of empowerment for African women, and novels like *Beloved, Sula* and *A Mercy* paint a gallery of characters who exemplify the maxim that exercising authority as mothers gives power to a woman to name and structure her life towards meaningful existence by resorting to the oppressive practices of her master. The female characters have a strong feeling towards their mother or any other character that helps them to fill the maternal void in their life. But following the line of thought in her previous novels, Morrison continues challenging the prevalent notion that portrays black women as either virtuous mothers, or sexually promiscuous women. The writer contests the stereotyped image of slave women and black mothers. According to Angela Davies’ argument about the limits of motherhood, it can be argued that Morrison’s novels
“problematize the mother, rather than romanticize her” (145). Mothers in Morrison’s novels free themselves from the boundaries of biological relations. *A Mercy*, through its characters and their story, opposes the maxim that all black mothers are inherently good and virtuous women, even if such a thought is possible.

Morrison has intentionally deviated from the theme of race in this particular novel. It depicts the time of the beginning of slave trade, and reveals that even white people were traded as slaves or indentured servants. There were white labours who were untrained and who worked for their master for a fixed period of time after signing a contract. This face of White American slavery was not given a proper representation in literature. Morrison has unveiled this form of servitude through the characters of Willard and Scully and their prolonged stay at Vaark’s house, even after their master’s death. The former was older in age and his contract had extended from seven to twenty-one years. The latter was serving Vaark to complete his mother’s servitude who was sent to America for her coarse behaviour and died there after a few years. Morrison has also created a space to introduce the character of a white woman who was travelling with Florens when she was being brought to America for chattel slavery. Her character presents the theme of women’s enslavement and oppression beyond demarcations of race and colour.

Morrison presents the theme of motherhood in her novels with multidimensional perspectives. The mothers in her novel are exploited, abandoned, unmothered as daughters, imprisoned for retaliating, sexually abused and emotionally harassed. Sometimes they are punished for acting as mothers, while sometimes they gather the courage to revolt against the powers of white hegemonic society. Most of the times, it is the intimate bond between one woman and another or between a woman and children of her community that completes her role as a mother by giving her an opportunity to feel her womanliness. Each character contributes towards enhancing the identity of another character or her daughter. *A Mercy* brings forth such issues of endurance, resistance and completeness through the array of its characters.

Slavery is shown as a recurring trade in the background of the novel. During slavery, slaves were denied the right to any social contact or relations with the community. Any kind of relation was considered illegal in the eyes of the slave
masters. More importantly, marital and filial relations were crushed by the forces of white hegemonic society. Slave men and women were forced to live under a social structure that completely destroyed any signs of the family system, as the cruel laws did not provide them any chance to exercise their socio-cultural power and rights in human relations. Men and women were not allowed to marry and their progeny were borne from illegal, immoral or socially unaccepted relations or as the result of rape or forced physical relations by men. Thus, this kind of distorted society and community created an environment where men, women and children were treated merely as merchandise in the hands of a capitalistic society.

It is a very common theme in black literature to present children as objects that served as a mechanism to suppress any activities of resistance by black women. But ironically, Morrison’s novels confront the usual tradition of black literature and raise the maternal powers of her women to a higher level. Michel Foucault observes: “There are no power relations without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (142). The mother-child relationships are categorized by the encounters between women who form a support system for each other in a community that renders it difficult for them to survive due to the restrictions imposed by the racist and sexist society.

The observations of many feminists show that maternal instincts are natural in women. But in black women’s writings, motherhood is presented as a bond that alters in accordance with constantly changing socio-cultural conditions, rather than being described as a biological determinant. In Of Woman Born, Andrienne Rich states that “the dominant male culture in separating man as knower from both woman and from nature as the objects of knowledge evolved certain intellectual polarities which still have the power to blind our imaginations” (62). Thus, it becomes important to study the limitations experienced by motherhood.

In their research on motherhood, many theorists like Nancy Chodorow, Patricia Bell-Scottt, Andrea O’ Reilley, to name a few, have observed that women have been bestowed by a natural desire for pregnancy and motherhood. This idea connects the ideas of motherhood with womanhood and implies that a woman is
complete only after she has experienced motherhood. The same notion is idealized and revered in the light of the above mentioned theory. But, the picture of maternal experiences and motherhood vacillates between the two extremely contradictory poles in the context of slavery, where mothers are either portrayed as completely sacrificing, or they become astoundingly cruel and dominating to other or their children.

Historically, black woman has been stereotyped as ‘mammy’, which tags her as a selfless mother. Although there has been a constant need to portray her as a powerful individual, there is also a tradition to romanticize her maternal experiences. At the same time, women who do not have children or deviate from conventional patterns of mothering are also bestowed with a negative image. A Mercy highlights the positive aspects of motherhood that do not prove to be totally supportive and selfless. There is a need to reformulate the ideas of motherhood, emphasizes Angela Davies, which gives “greater degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women- defined patterns of mothering, in and out of its biological mandates and social constructs” (142). Such arguments liberate the institution of motherhood from the strict parametres of previously formulated notions and stereotypes. Like the earlier novels discussed in this study, this novel also deconstructs the traditional image of woman as mother and shifts its presentation to plainly mother- like, or not mother- like women. Morrison’s novels have many characters that come forward to perform their roles as mothers and daughters. The reason lies in the slave culture that never allows them to raise their biological children, and children are considered blessed if they can find other women of their community to take care of them. It is a network of these women and unloved children that lends density to the dramatization to the story of these characters.

A Mercy successfully constructs these biologically unrelated bonds between women and children. The novel delineates a complex picture of mother- child relationship which cannot be explained under the traditional notions or conventions. bell hooks notes that, “marginality [can be seen] as much more than a site of deprivation…it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance…a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (150). In orde to challenge and deny their victimized and marginalized state, black women resist
the dominating practices by loving their children to claim their natural rights as mothers.

In *A Mercy*, Florens’ mother also experiences grave physically and mentally confining contradictions that limit a black mother’s role and periphery. Both mother and daughter belong to D’ Ortega-a Portugese slave owner. He owes money to Jacob Vaark, a tradesman. When Jacob demands his money, “it becomes clear what D’ Ortega is left to offer. Slaves”(21). But “Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity” (22). At the same time, Florens’ mother cries out and, “He saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one holding 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’ ” (23). But D’ Ortega is reluctant to offer her and says: “Ah, No. Impossible. My wife can’t stay longer without her” (24). It becomes clear that as a slave woman, Florens’ mother is sexually abused by him and so the owner is not ready to trade her. At the same time:

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. (26)

Maternal love and its articulation often seem difficult to comprehend, especially when a mother is left with no choice except to push her daughter to a lesser degree of evil in an attempt to save her from higher degree of social horrors. Mothers like Sethe, Eva and Harriet Jacobs are strong examples of this ideal. But these mothers are often misunderstood and misinterpreted by their own children as well as by the society. Florens’ mother’s appeal also startles Jacob, who cannot understand her real concern, which is borne out of a mother’s fear and helplessness. He thinks that the daughter is an “ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away” (34). Jacob’s view and understanding of a black mother is restricted to her image of a mean and selfish lady. He is a white male, so he has his own perceptions without knowing her restricted conditions as a black mother who is denied any right to mother her
biological children. Half-heartedly, he agrees to the exchange, thinking that he is doing a favour by saving a daughter from her mother’s ill—feelings, and for him, “acquisition [of Florens]…could be seen as a rescue” (34).

Later in the novel, her mother is given a chance to explain herself to her daughter when Morrison gives her an opportunity to speak as the first-person narrator. This technique gives a platform to black women to speak their unspeakable thoughts that cannot be explained or understood in the wake of slavery. In *Beloved*, Sethe’s feelings are expressed in the same manner in a chapter which the novelist devotes to Sethe’s dilemma as a mother and writes from Sethe’s perspective. Like Sethe, Florens’ mother also justifies her maternal concern to her daughter which she could express only through rejection. But there is a difference between the two confessions. Sethe leaves all hope and desire to be forgiven, but Florens’ mother is still confident of her justifications that she can give to her daughter, explaining her the truth of the possible horrible consequences of her staying with her mother. She presents her argument and explains to her that “you [Florens] wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor’s eye” (166). Her mother attempts to keep her daughter with herself as long as possible. But she has apprehensions about Florens’ security as she can notice lust in the master’s eyes for her daughter. She is not willing to accept that her daughter will also suffer the same abuse as a slave woman that she has undergone throughout her entire life. She knows that Florens is destined to suffer the same life like her mother and other countless black slave women. She continues to tell her: “One chance, I thought. There is no protection, but there is difference” (166). There is no safe and secure place, but still she wants to make a difference in her life by saving her at least from sexual abuse, if not from the evils of servitude. Her argument is similar to Jacob’s, yet there lies a difference in the perception of the two because of the distinct relation they share with Florens. The mother explains:

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was
not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. (166-7)

The voice of Florens’ mother echoes the concern of many other black mothers who are unable to provide a safe zone to their daughters.

The exploitation of black women as reproductive tool is a commonly recurring theme in the novels of Morrison. Soon after her purchase by the Senohor, Florens’ mother is taken to a curing shed with other two slave women. It is dark and shadows of men sit on barrels. “They said they were told to break in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars from, the fester is ever below” (161). After the “breaking in”, the chief gives an orange to each woman and the men feel sorry as they are ordered to do the act. The results of her repeated sexual abuse are Florens and her brother. Her mother accepts her inevitable fate as a slave woman. However, such relationship does not offer any firm ground to the fundamental relation of mother-daughter as the mother is devoid of any hope to provide a secure life to her children.

Other than being a victim of male oppression, she is depicted as the member of a racially homogenized group. In her feeble state against pressures of patriarchy and capitalism, she makes frail attempts to find some peace in religion. Yet, nothing can alleviate her anxiety and fears about her daughter’s unsafe future who “wants the shoes of a loose woman, and whose body is growing into womanhood” (164). As a helpless mother and a silenced subject, she weakly tries to express her fear and concern in an indirect and implicit manner. She sings a song near the hand pump when Jacob and Senohor walk to the shed after they decide to take her daughter. The song is about a green bird that is killed while guarding her children. The bird is symbolically Florens’ mother who does not suffer a literal but a metaphorical death in her attempt to save her daughter because she has to kill her maternal instinct and demean her image as a mother by offering her daughter as a slave in place of herself or her son.

Her plight can be compared to Sethe’s pain. But again, the former’s misery is bearable in comparison to the intense play of powerful emotions of the latter. The former is only distanced from her child, but the latter is not even given a choice to let
her child live. Sethe has never felt blessed as a mother. She cannot see her Beloved growing. But Florens is at least with her mother during early years of her life. Her mother has decided something for her benefit. But, her decision is not so unacceptable and grotesque that the mother will have to repent and regret to the extent of punishing herself.

As a daughter, Florens has felt the difference after venturing into a new journey of life at the Vaark household. She is blessed by the company of other women at her new master’s house; women who serve as her mother, friends and companions. For black mothers like Sethe and Florens’s mother, traditional meanings of home change and are even distorted. The absence of family and values coupled with a strong determination to save one’s daughter from social death empowers them to counter the strong brutal system of their masters. There is also a remarkable comparison between the slave owners in the two novels. Jacob is expected to treat Florens in a more humane manner whereas Sethe knows that Beloved will be given a life of dirt, filth and shame in the hands of the schoolteacher.

With an unusual decision to choose abandonment as a form of protection, Florens’s mother has also adopted ways of unspeakable violence. Alternating in age from children to adults, the female characters in Morrison’s fictions often rely on harsh decisions or acts to seek refuge from the unavoidable pain of their inevitable destiny as slaves. This bent of mind results from the manifold subjugation which is suffered by these characters, especially mothers, at different stages of their life that combines with their social exclusion, communal rejection and cultural domination. In fact, their powerless position is redirected by their violent acts which are inflicted on and suffered by people of their family or community. These actions and decisions constitute a new definition of black femininity and womanliness. It asserts that black women are not as feeble as it is predicted by their masters because they devise their own forms of resistance and construct new patterns of retaliation within their own power and capacity. They commit infanticide, leave their children to arrange for their living, reject their children for a safer place, mutilate their body parts to keep their children alive and sometimes they can muster such powers that they feel they can even decide to burn their child alive because they will not let it suffer from the agonizing pangs of daily death. Be it a son or daughter, black mothers are entrusted
with an additional responsibility to educate their children in survival practices to live in a racist society.

These women suffer violence and abuse in their home also from their master, employer, community members or sometimes their kin. However it may be painful to accept, but this unusual articulation of maternal love and concern can be interpreted as a lesson to future generations, an educative message which trains black children in their survival mechanisms within a world that deprives them of their basic rights as human beings. Whether literal or symbolic, a mother’s abandonment is a shared display of love and concern, often shown in a mother’s outrageous act or unacceptable decision. But regardless of the mother’s intention behind her anger, the child often questions the mother about her love. Sometimes the child is driven to a wrong judgment about her mother’s purpose and behaviour. These forms of violence also lead to a disruption of normal emotional structure and weaken the child’s formulation of his/her own identity in a world which is governed by the binaries of ‘self’ and ‘other’. Be it Florens, Hannah, Sula, Beloved or Nel and Claudia, none of them apprehends their mother’s anger and frustration in a normal responsive manner.

Like *Beloved* and *Sula*, *A Mercy* also delineates the portrayal of a “good mother” who opts to distance herself from her daughter in the hope of providing a comparatively better life for her daughter. However, it is true that as a daughter, Florens also internalizes her own sense of her mother’s rejection. It often gets reflected in her negative behaviour, erupting in excessive violence exhibited by Florens against her new rivals later in life.

Florens is a little girl of about eight years when she is exchanged for money to Jacob. She misunderstands her mother’s motive for not offering the son as a slave in her place, and remembers with innocent sorrow

forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minah mae begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says. My daughter, she says. Me. Me. (7)
Her pain and negligence are expressed in her emphasis on the word “Me. Me…forever and ever”(15), which demonstrates that she is shocked to hear her mother’s decision to separate her from herself. Her disbelief reminds us of Hannah’s suspicion of her mother’s love, who is unable to understand her mother Eva’s condition and the reasons behind her limits, stopping her to play with her children. Of course, in the case of Florens, both mother and daughter are enslaved. To her disbelief over the mother’s choice, the young girl knows only the choice that her mother has made. She also expresses her own thoughts by noting that “mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose…holding the little boy’s hand” (8). Florens can only identify that her mother has chosen her brother over her and the same perception shapes and directs her whole future. It proves disastrous to the child’s self-esteem and her ability to maintain a successful relationship with anyone in her life. In due course, as readers we are informed that she does this because “Sir” has “no animal in her heart” (163), which is comparatively easier to bear in relation to the intentions of her present master who has raped her several times and has started noticing changes in Florens’ maturing body. The mother begs for a second chance to be given to her daughter to live and pleadingly kneels before the trader to take her with him. She agrees to make a sacrifice to give life to both her children. She does what other slave mothers in Morrison’s novels do. bell hooks elaborates on the same concern and notes: “In the midst of a brutal racist system, which did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist that system” (144). This idea is well exemplified in Ferdrick Douglass’s autobiographical The Narrative of Fredrick Dogulass in his description of his own mother who used to walk twelve miles at night, whenever probable, to embrace her son once. It also seems valid here because Florens’s mother transgresses all set boundaries to give a less dehumanized life to her daughter.

Morrison has presented motherhood as a complex idea in all its multi-dimensional perspectives. The fluidity of this idea parallels the evolution of Florens’s character and her journey towards womanhood in the novel. As a little girl, Florens has always begged for shoes even though she has always been discouraged by her mother for her “prettify ways” (4). The motif of shoes stands for a mother’s strong
love which a mother should extend to her daughter. Thus, the absence of this tough mother love fails to nurture respect in Florens for her mother’s advice at the end of the novel. She is emotionally enslaved by her love for the blacksmith. Towards the end of the novel, Florens realizes that she has got her boots. She grieves that “it is hard without Sir’s boots” but that “her way is clear after losing [the blacksmith]” (184). Her path is clear after she experiences the loss of her relation with the blacksmith. She understands her mother’s final advice, but only after her first-hand experience. Through Florens, Morrison has tried to show the loss incurred in a daughter’s personality in the absence of her authentic connections with her ‘motherline’. Hope Edleman emphasizes that “motherline stories ground a daughter in a gender, a family and a feminine history. They transform the experiences of female ancestors into maps she can refer to for warning or encouragement” (201). These stories also firm up the bond between a mother and daughter by drawing them close to their traditional heritage and enrich their self-perception. Florens grows without her mother’s protective love and feels the loss of some strong support that can nurture a sense of importance in her.

In the world of her own thoughts, Florens vacillates between the past that echoes with her mother’s memories and her present life where her mother figures nowhere at all. Sometimes she is silent, sometimes angry or full of tears. When she speaks her own mind, she makes it clear that she is still unable to believe the painful truth of her childhood that her mother chose to offer her to Vaark and not her brother. Her words reveals her pain and agony; “An ice floe cut away from the river bank in deep water. I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow” (156). Again, “I am becoming wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving” (159). Her anger also displays her inability to comprehend the meanings of her mother’s last words that she speaks before Florens leaves her. Even if she tries to comfort herself from her mother’s words, she is pushed back by her mother’s criticism on her longing to wear shoes: “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Ma? You can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are as hard as cypress” (159). The last words explicitly indicate that she has embraced the thought that her mother has deprived her of any happiness, even the simple idea of
wearing high-heeled shoes is not appreciated by her mother. For Florens, her desire is simple, but her mother knows that her simple wish can prove dangerous for her as it shows a shift in Florens’ behaviour and her attraction to appear physically beautiful. It is clear in the last chapter that Florens lives her entire life with this misunderstanding about her mother’s decision. Her innocence does not explain to her that her desire to wear shoes is disapproved by her mother because it is in a way indicative of her “prettify ways”, and her mother does not want her to grow up with such desires, indicative of beauty and attraction as she is not entitled to any such life as a slave girl.

Florens’ desire to love and be loved springs from her mother’s rejection. Her relation with Lina and Sorrow cannot quench her hunger for love, and she seeks prospects for that missing relation through her association with the blacksmith, who also deserts her in the end because of her ugliness and colour. Florens’s relation with him is the beginning of a new phase of her life after which she learns that her survival in this world is difficult without a strong hand to guide and support her. In the end she is left without any master. It makes her realize that she is now incomplete as she does not have any authority to provide her with a safe place and shelter in the society. Her existence revolves around her life of servitude and the master’s house proves to be a better place to live a life where there is no risk of physical abuse. She tries to find the missing love of her childhood days in her later life, but the quest proves drastic. Like Pauline in The Bluest Eye, who tries to seek refuge in Cholly’s love, Florens also wishes to find a support in the blacksmith’s strength. But ironically, instead of finding a support, she feels like a stem that has been cut unripe from its branch. She has no strong love to trust, no hand to hold and no branch to grow on. Lina, another slave in the same house, observes that

Since his coming there was an appetite in the girl that Lina recognized as once her own. A bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience. The young body speaking in its only language its sole reason for life on earth. When he arrived, too shiny, way too tall, both arrogant and skilled- Lina alone saw the peril, but there was no one to complain to. (57)
Florens feels that the vacuum of her childhood days and the scars formed by her separation from her mother at an early age change her into a very vulnerable character. She can easily rely on anyone to enter into an emotionally fulfilling relationship. Her journey and her bitter knowledge of her relations with the blacksmith prove emotionally very damaging, yet educative for her. She understands the “shattering a free black man would cause” (71). His liberal personality is beyond any moral constraints. He does not recognize any social or cultural responsibilities. He has no supporting branch to offer to Florens for her firm support. Morrison has also employed nature imagery to juxtapose Florens’ folly to the truth of this situation. Lina tells her that “[she] is one leaf leaf on [the blacksmith’s] tree” (58), to which Florens resorts with a firm note of hope and says that “No. I am his tree” (58).

Morrison has depicted the relation of Lina and Florens as that of a surrogate mother and daughter. Through Lina’s character, Morrison has focused upon the role of ‘other mothers’ and ‘community mothers’. Florens has no biological mother to save her from the evils of the social order. In a racist society, the worst fate for a black female is to encounter evil thoughts of man in the form of sexist and racist practices of the society. In Patricia Hill Collins’ words, ‘racial ethnic children’s lives have long been held in low regard” (Forcey, 49).

In a racist culture that lowers the self-regard of black children, it is important for mothers to instill in their children a sense of self-worth and self-esteem so that they can identify their lost place in society. But still, Lina attempts to save Florens from all possible threats after the blacksmith’s arrival. She narrates a story to Florens. In short, the story tells about an extremely wary eagle “[lays] her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them” (60). Symbolically, it refers to a mother’s attempts to protect her daughter from any approaching evil. This fierce mother has a beak “like the scythe of a war god” and talons “sharpened on rock” (60). This raw animal imagery reminds us of a fiercely protective mother who can go to any extreme to defend her children, as is the case with Sethe and Eva in Beloved and Sula.

The analogy between these characters also confirms the notion that black women are primary agents in the physical and emotional well-being of their children.
But despite all their struggles, black mothers fall short of adequate measures to defend themselves from the worst bad luck in their world—“the evil thoughts of man” (61). The eagle tries to attack the hunter, but he strikes her with his stick and sends her back, failed in her attempts. The mother eagle “is carried by wind instead of wing” (61). Metaphorically, the eagle is the mother and the hunter is the man who poses a threat to her children. The image of an eagle that is carried by the wind implies that despite all efforts, mothers sometimes fail to provide the needed protection to their children. To Florens’ misfortune, her biological mother half succeeds, but Lina, her surrogate mother in the novel, completely loses her in the name of saving her mistress Rebekka, who can be saved from small pox only by the blacksmith whom Florens can find. Lina’s helplessness is equivalent to many other slave mothers who prove weak in their capacity as mothers in dealing with their hegemonic powers of the slave society. This image of the eagle and the hunter foreshadows Lina’s powerlessness in protecting Florens from the blacksmith’s evil eye, which is shown in Florens’ journey to the end of the story.

Lina and Florens’ relation moves beyond the traditional realms of mother-daughter bonds. As a common theme in African-American motherhood, maternal relations can be formed with other women such as friends, neighbours and grandmothers. Gloria Joseph argues that “black women play integral parts in the family and frequently it is immaterial whether they are biological mothers, sisters or members of the extended family” (76). This enlarged family network is forcefully represented through Lina’s character. The relationship of Lina and Florens contributes to the analysis of those circumstances in which both women develop a distinct mother-daughter bond after being trapped as slaves.

Both are traded as slaves and separated from their families at an early age. Lina’s role as a mother in her community is governed by the emotional loss that she has suffered after being separated from her community, followed by the time she spends in the Presbyterian community. Her yearning to recover the lost connections with her family is still alive in her heart. It is in her relationship with Florens that she is provided with the space to relive her days as a mother. She aches for “mother hunger- to be one or have one- both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone” (61). Her yearning to reunite with her
family and children is intensified after her stay as a marginalized character in the Presbyterian community. However for her enlivening the relations means to bestow that care and concern on Florens from which she herself has been deprived throughout her life. She understands the pain and loss which is incurred on a daughter in a slave society.

When Lina sees Florens for the first time, she “had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow” (60). Florens notes that “Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth” (8), signifying their understanding and concern for each other. Slowly and gradually, they are drawn closer and start developing a liking for each other. “They had memorable nights, lying tighter, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina’s stories” (61). Florens feels safe and secure in Lina’s embrace and she “would sigh then, her head on Lina’s shoulder and when sleep came the little girl’s smile lingered” (61). Lina’s love and Florens’ trust nurture each other. She loves the stories told by Lina, but the ones which she loves the most are mainly about mothers exhibiting maternal love and courage: “Especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters” (61). She admires the tales of strong and defensive mothers who can go to any extreme to ensure their children’s survival. Her appreciation also gives us a slight hint of her craving for the same kind of association, as she mistakenly believes that her mother does not care for her and sells her to the trader. This pattern of mother-child bond can be discussed as per O’Reilley’s argument that “[o]ther women, while not mothers themselves, are ship and safe harbor to children through the practice of other mothering” (41). She notes that such women “heal the woman by prompting her to take a journey of rememory and reconnection with the spirit of the lost mother” (41). Such relationships among black women also facilitate them to survive and shape their subjectivity.

Florens’ dependency on Lina’s guidance is revealed when she wishes that Lina should advise her before she sets off on her errand to find the blacksmith: “I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness” (42). Acting as her other mother, Lina guides Florens with her own experience and awareness of the world. When Florens is alone, she misses “sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina” (6). She is a dutiful daughter to Lina and constantly ponders over her advice while she is on her journey.
“Lina says, not all natives are like her. So watch out” (5). She remembers these teachings as important instructions to be followed on a way to her journey. Their bonding suggests that “the concept of motherhood cannot be reduced to biological function” (Joseph, 83), particularly in a slave society, where black mothers do not exercise any authority on their children’s life or in shaping their future.

Lina and Florens try to provide to each other what each of them has missed in their life. Lina speaks of her unseen and unspeakable wounds that are given by white men and their community “he uses the flat of his hand when he has anger…She tells me how it is to walk lanes wiping blood from your nose. The Presbyterians used to stare at her face and the blood wipes on her clothes, but say nothing” (104-5). Lina has undergone both deliverance and destruction at their hands. Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing; the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay. And both had come to terms. (96)

Lina’s concern is to plan a different future for her adopted daughter Florens, but her motherly warnings and care go in vain as she cannot prevent her from falling in love with the blacksmith. Through these new and self-cultivated bonds, each of them tries to recompense for the earlier trauma of loss and desertion by loving and being loved by the other.

_A Mercy_ also deals with the issue of the formulation of a woman’s subjectivity. Lina’s subjectivity is shaped by Florens’ pain and loss and her unfulfilled wish to feel a motherly presence. Florens has a strong faith in whatever Lina says, “Lina says from the state of my teeth I am maybe seven or eight. Lina says Sir has a clever way of getting without giving” (5). It shows that her understanding of Jacob is based on Lina’s view of Jacob. She tries to warn her, and Florens tries to provide her the satisfaction to behave as a mother. She says: “Lina says my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than later, that life requires” (4). Her observation on her feet means that she is emotionally weak during that phase of her life in which she should be tough and strong. This is also a hint towards Florens’ weakness in releasing her emotions too soon and easily, which
can prove devastating and devouring for the bonds created by a slave woman. Lina acts not only as a mother by showering her love and concerns on Florens, but also proves that she understands Florens better as is evident in her observation and remark on Florens’s feet and soles.

The loss of a mother also shapes Florens’ character to a great extent. She is separated from her biological mother at an early age but is continuously trapped in her memories. Even after her association with Lina, Florens is unable to construct a positive subjectivity of her own. She faces a difficulty in comprehending and bringing together the loose threads of her memories and cannot weave them into a meaningful story. “Too many signs or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much” (4). She is too immature to clear her perception about the nature of her loss. She has firm and unshakable feelings about her mother and is greatly hurt when she is taken away by Jacob.

At Jacob’s farm, little Florens is constantly trying to live up to everyone’s expectations because she is scared that they will abandon her as her mother did. She lacks self-confidence because she thinks that she is not worthy of love and acceptance. She cannot connect herself to any ancestral roots: “Lina says there are some spirits who look after warriors and hunters and there are others who guard virgins and mothers. I am none of those” (68). Lina’s understanding reflects her perception but neither her, nor Florens’s condition fits the description. They are chattel slaves with no traditional associations and left to suffer as orphans. But, Florens does not fit into any category and knows the fact that she is left alone in this world without any guardian spirits to look after. The displaced condition of Lina and Florens exemplifies the life of many young slave girls who have undergone such psychological split in the course of their struggle for survival.

Sorrow’s character presents a different facet of motherhood which is significant in conferring new meanings to the idea of motherhood, particularly in African culture. She is the second character after Rebekka whose identity is aligned with the archetypal imagery of mother in fictional representations. Her existence is completely devoted to her maternal role. Her happiness, grief, sacrifices; everything revolves around her devotion to mothering. Morrison has shown Sorrow’s journey of
emancipation by her journey from a salve woman to a mother. Her character-sketch is marked by shades of intense grief and misery. She realizes her identity and defines her sense of self through the trope of motherhood. She is found by a sawyer, “half dead on a river bank” (38). She is the only woman who survives the disaster faced by a slave ship. Her survival becomes so difficult that to release her thoughts and share her feelings, she invents an imaginary character Twin to relieve her psychological burden of slavery. For her, Twin is the only person whom she can trust as a friend. They perform all the activities together: “Both skinned down the broken mast and started walking a rocky shoreline” (117). She is the only companion of Sorrow in her moments of isolation. When she is found by sawyers, she is reminded that “she woke up naked under a blanket, with a warm wet cloth on her forehead. A woman with white hair was watching her” (117). She is stopped by Twin whenever she begins to speak. Her companion “whispered NO, so she shrugged her shoulders and found that a convenient gesture for the other information” (118). She does not speak more than a few words, so the housewife gives her the name Sorrow. She has devised her own world of communion with her self-devised companion in her mind-Twin- and does not open her heart to anyone except her.

Sorrow too is a victim of racial abuse. She is not aware that her sexual abuse is another form of subjugation because she remembers her life of an oppressed slave woman who has always suffered domination at the hands of a white racist society. There are various hints in the novel which suggest that she has been sexually abused during her stay at the Sawyers house. She also reveals that “on occasion she had secret company other than Twin, but not better than Twin” (119). This also suggests her secret abuse by the Sawyers. The next incident is that of her first experiences of menstruation, and “the housewife told her it was monthly blood; that all females suffered it and she believed it until the next month and the next and the next when it did not return” (119). This information tells us that Sorrow will be giving birth to an illegitimate child after being abused, a common ill-fate suffered mostly by slave women. Her fate has been stamped as the fate of many other slave women. She is unable to believe what has happened to her. She has no one to console her or create her aware about her situation. Her immaturity cannot explain to her the reasons of her physical changes in her, nor guide her in ways to face the situation. She then shares
her curiosity with Twin, “about whether it [her pain] was instead result of the goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending. Because the pain was outside between her legs, not inside where the housewife said” (119-120). Sorrow is a slave girl who is separated from her family at an early age. She has grown up without any teachings by her mother to help her know her femininity. Her negligence is evident from her unawareness about the consequences of her physical abuse about which she becomes aware only when she is pregnant.

In the novel, the most important rite of passage into womanhood- the beginning of menstruation and knowledge of sexuality- to emphasize the loss suffered by Sorrow due to her disassociation from her ‘motherline’. According to Naomi Lowinsky:

> When a woman comes to understand her life story as a story from the Motherline, she gains female authority in a number of ways. First, her Motherline grounds her in her feminine nature as she struggles with the many options now open to women. Second, she reclaims carnal knowledge of her own body, its blood mysteries and their power. Third, as she makes the journey back to her female roots, she will encounter ancestors who struggled with similar difficulties in different historical times….Fourth, she uncovers her connection to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient world view, which holds the body and soul are one and all life is interconnected. And, finally, she reclaims her female perspective, from which to consider how men are similar and how they are different. (13)

The onset of menstruation is a female rite symbolizing the beginning of her journey to womanhood and it is a mother who creates awareness and guides her daughter into this phase. But Sorrow is initiated into this in the absence of her mother and lives with half- knowledge of this biological change. So she does not know how she should react emotionally and physically to the situation. The “pain outside between her legs” troubles her because it is different from the pain which she has earlier suffered, as told by the housewife. Sorrow becomes a woman from an adolescent girl during her stay at Jacob’s house. Her worst fate as a slave woman begins with her sexual abuse and results in her pregnancy. The name ‘Sorrow’ also symbolizes the grief-stricken journey of her life. The loneliness is intensified when she begins talking to her split
Thus, it clearly reveals the character’s inability to connect with the society or to forge any other purposeful relationship after suffering the loss that she has borne due to her separation from her ‘motherline’.

Ironically, as compared to Lina or Florens, Sorrow does not manifest any desire to reunite with her lost family or connect to her lost ‘motherline’. Later, there are slight hints that Sorrow is also abused at Jacob’s farm. For instance, she is given the privilege to sleep in the house but Lina is unconcerned about the physical comfort given to her inspite of the fact that she is a slave. There is a growing tension between Rebeka, Jacob’s wife, and Sorrow, regarding the truth of the father of Sorrow’s child. Rebekka is suspicious that the father of Sorrow is Jacob and it is very late that they are told the truth by Lina. Jacob’s permission to let Sorrow sleep inside the house implies that she has suffered physical abuse at his hands also. Even then, we cannot ignore the fact that she has been exploited by other men because it is only faintly implied that Jacob has abused Sorrow.

Irrespective of all pain, humiliation and emotional dilemmas, Sorrow takes a firm decision to give birth to her baby. She “took a knife and a blanket to the riverbank the moment the first pain hit” (132). Alone, she is “screeching when she had to, sleeping in between, until the next brute tear of the body and breathe” (132). Hardened earlier after bearing all corporal pain and humiliation as a slave woman, she is now stone to all kinds of pain to be a mother, but hopes that at least the servants Willard and Scully will come to her support. They eventually see Sorrow and “[kneeling] in water as Sorrow pushed, they pulled, eased and turned the tiny form stuck between her legs” (133). She successfully delivers a baby girl. Later, “she is prompted by the legitimacy of her new status as a mother” (133), and is proud of herself after becoming a mother.

Morrison describes and places motherhood as a site of power. O’ Reilley writes:

Building upon black women’s experiences of, and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture. (1)
O’Reilley’s argument supports Sorrow’s stance as a mother and explains her resolution to be a mother. Morrison’s viewpoint on motherhood enables black women to resort to the negative conceptions of femininity by reshaping and rearticulating the powers inherent in black women. Sorrow’s new journey into the most sacred profession of a woman’s life begins without any support from an elderly woman. She is not afraid of her situation even when she has no help in the process of giving birth to a child. Her situation is similar to Sethe’s situation in *Beloved*, who also fights and defeats death that follows her in the form of the Schoolteacher’s nephews. She also gives birth to her daughter Denver at a riverside with the help of an unknown white woman Amy, whose help proves that communal bonds exist outside the boundaries created by colour or culture. Sethe situates herself within the world of her maternity and denies the interventions from any external forces, dominating her as a slave woman who is deprived of any rights to be a mother.

In *A Mercy*, Sorrow’s life also changes completely after being a mother. She begins “attending routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs” (134). She starts caring for her daughter, performs her regular tasks and interacts with the people around her with whom she has shared no relation before her baby’s birth. Her imaginary companion Twin also withdraws because now Sorrow has a daughter with whom she shares an intimate bond. She interacts with Lina, Florens and Rebekka, and displays her courage to speak for herself when she remarks to her mistress that “it was good enough that the blacksmith came to help you when you were dying” (133). Her maternal role has not only given birth to new relations or developed her emotional sensibility towards other people around her, but has also given her the confidence to discover her new self.

Sorrow is an epitome of the positive aspect of motherhood and a mother’s stance. First, she is able to connect to her own child and, second, she is able to discover her self-esteem. She lives in a world where feelings of self-love and self-worth are considered important as well as difficult to embrace because the racist culture deprives them of any basic rights. The mother-child bond also gains its significance from the fact that mother-love instills a sense of self-realization in children. Sorrow is deprived of this care and attention but this newly experienced bond
helps her to recover that non-existent bond which she had never felt. Her journey from womanhood to motherhood is also a journey of her completeness.

After giving birth to her child, she liberates herself from her world of isolation and gloom, which is reflected in her name. But, the strongest transformation in her personality is seen in the new name which she gives to herself after becoming a mother- “Complete”. The world names her Sorrow, she calls herself Complete. Men humiliate her physically; she can now nurture her ‘self’. As a woman, she is incomplete without knowing the bliss of motherhood. After giving birth to her daughter, she changes her name because she has devised the means to step out of this incompleteness with her new outlook towards her life in reconstructing and renaming it with a new structure. She speaks with full authority and awareness: “I am your mother. My name is Complete” (134). This image mirrors a very distinct image from Pauline’s relations with her daughter in *The Bluest Eye*. When she becomes a mother, her dislike for the black colour of her child further disintegrates the perception of her own identity as a black woman which pushed her into an abyss of distorted relationships and degraded self-esteem.

Hudson-Weems agreed in support of African womanism which also fits Sorrow’s analysis in her new character. He remarks that “proper self-naming and proper self-defining, as a means of establishing clarity, will at the same time offer the first step towards correcting confusion and misconception regarding one’s true identity” (20). The observation is significant as it shows that the act of naming shows the individual’s awareness and knowledge of his/her identity without any misconceptions. Sorrow renames herself and rejects the name by which she is known as a slave. The name is given by her master, and he is the one who defines her status and limits her life in the society. But by calling herself Complete, she steps out of the definable confined space of a slave woman and extends the realm of her authority and power by setting new definitions of her ‘self’ as a complete woman- after being a mother to her daughter. Thus, her name suggests her beautiful state, with a stable and peaceful mind and her ability to positively rename her subjectivity in a world which does not offer any scope of fulfilling relationships. She overcomes the state of emotional weakness and the psychological barriers because of which she begins conversing to her imaginary companion Twin. She develops a new ethical attitude
towards her work in the Vaark household. Her work is not an imposed duty, but makes her comprehend her abilities.

Twin was gone traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her. Sorrow’s wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs, impervious to the complaint of others. She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw them in the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. (132)

Her growing interest in a more efficient accomplishment of her tasks instills in her a sense of self-confidence. She is not only a slave, but a mother who comes back home to her daughter after the day’s hard labour. Ironically, she is fortunate to be a slave who steps into motherhood in the Vaark household. She is luckier than many other slave women who do not get a chance to be with their children even for a week. She is a blessed mother in comparison to Sethe, Ella and Baby Suggs, who did not even get a chance to see the first tooth of their children. As a slave woman, she has subverted the Africanist discourse of a marginalized slave mother who is given neither the freedom, nor the right to stand and live up to the expected roles of a mother. In fact, black women were given the status of breeders. They were physically exploited to increase the number of slaves for the economic benefit of slave masters. So, there was no space available to black mothers to articulate their womanly instincts as they were crushed, defiled and spoiled in the deadly white hands of their owners.

One of the most important periods for the critics on maternal thinking was mid-1970s. They began examining the positive aspects of motherhood. “Because women’s reproductive capacity historically had been used to define and confine them, motherhood was rightly seen as the paramount source of oppression” (Badinter; Firestone). Women were seen as vulnerable individuals after giving birth to a child because motherhood was a way to control women’s reproductive capacity and another means of domination by the patriarchal society. On the one hand, it was a generally accepted view that women as mothers were oppressed in a patriarchal society, but these feminists began citing upon the progressive dimensions of mothering. It is important to note that these Eurocentric views on motherhood proved
contradictory to the relational analysis of the black mother-daughter experiences within specific socio-economic contexts.

Sorrow’s powerful character strongly refutes the prevalent notion of motherhood as oppression. She is raised to the pedestal of a warrior who fights all physical and psychological pain to take her stand as a daughter’s mother. She becomes a speaking subject, from a subaltern or silenced subject. Her journey to motherhood is the journey of her emancipation and liberty, which not only reforms her personality, but also develops her understanding as an individual who can live as per her own desires and requirements. Rather than acting as a puppet in the hands of the society, she controls the thread of her destiny and situates herself in the midst of a sacred relationship. Her character also signifies the multiple and diverse forms of this relationship in a hostile social, cultural and racial context. To an extent, her character runs parallel to Sethe’s character. Both the women restrict their identity strictly as mothers, situate themselves in the circle of maternal responsibilities and consider it as their sacred duty to live or die for their daughters. It is a very beautiful and strong bond which exalts black mothering and their maternal zeal and confidence to stretch their inherent potential to acts of destruction or self-destruction. She justly evidences that motherhood in Morrison’s writings is profoundly an act of resistance that signifies itself as essential and intricate to black women’s counter response to the operating racism and sexism. Morrison has defined motherhood as:

The most liberating thing that ever happened to me….Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of normal ‘other’. ..I could not only be me- whatever that was- but somebody actually needed me to be that. It’s different from being a daughter. …..The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want…Also you could begin to see the world through their eyes again- which are your eyes. I found that extraordinary. (Taylor- Guthrie 1994: 270-71)

The above mentioned quote supports Donna Basin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan’s statement on motherhood, “as a freeing, generative experience” (2). Such an idea powerfully builds a contrasting study with the “predominant image of the mother in the White society [which assumes mothers are] ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing….not destroyed or overwhelmed by the
demands of [their] child [ren]” (2-3). Many Anglo-American feminists have argued that motherhood is an oppressive institution in a patriarchal society. Opposite to this, Morrison states that motherhood unshackles her and gives her a “better-self”. These sets of contradictory notions of motherhood in the context of White and Black society make a significant comparison between Sorrow, Lina and Florens and Rebekka; the last white woman in the novel and is also given an authoritative position in terms of colour and race, but still lowered in her role as a mother.

While Lina and Sorrow succeed in transforming their identity through their stance as mother and daughter, Rebekka cannot gather the bits and pieces of her ruined self as a woman. She is a White immigrant who has been brought to New England to marry Jacob. Morrison’s purpose in positioning her as a childless mother problematizes the structures of the conventional narratives of American literature in which the Eurocentric patterns dominate the Africanist presence. Her choice to present Rebekka, the mistress of Vaark household, as a childless woman till the end, throws light on the plight of a woman, irrespective of her ethnicity and race. She gave birth to four children but they all died soon after their birth. She is shown as a greater tragic character in comparison to Lina, Sorrow and Florens- the other three women who suffer their inevitable fate because of their destiny as slaves. These black women are either rejected or separated from their lineage by the adverse socio-cultural forces. But they reclaim their lost connections by framing new bonds with other women around them. Florens associates with Lina to find maternal solace and the latter fulfils her desire to be a mother by being a surrogate mother to Florens. On the other hand, Sorrow challenges all the traditional stereotypes of a slave woman and identifies herself as a complete woman after giving birth to a child who is born after her sexual abuse. She is totally unlike Sethe or her mother who kill their child either to retaliate against their master or to save their daughter from the ills of slavery. She does not consider the child to be a symbol of physical abuse but enriches her experience of giving birth to a child by cherishing this maternal bliss and transforms it into a precious gift of a lifetime. Her character also reminds us of Hester Prynne’s character in The Scarlet Letter. Hester also gives birth to a daughter after her illicit relations with a clergyman. But the child is not a symbol of sin for the mother, but a gem of love, which is clearly denoted by her name Pearl- a precious stone that
denotes purity and peace. It symbolizes the purity of a mother’s emotions and the mental peace of a woman who feels the eternal bliss of maternity. Though Sorrow’s child is not a result of love, she keeps her close to her heart and gathers all courage and strength from being a mother.

When juxtaposed with these characters, Rebekka proves to be a weak woman who is not able to place her emotional strength in any such paradigms of love and attachment. Like other black women, she is unable to redefine her subjectivity with a new perspective on life. She is in a pitiful condition and her weakness further diminishes her mental strength after the death of her husband Jacob. Her behaviour with the three slave women, Lina, Florens and Sorrow, changes from polite to cruel. Very different from a black woman’s spirit and courage, her total personality crumbles under isolation and loneliness. Her frustration is released on her women slaves who are powerless, yet strong and proud of their valour. Her anger is a manifestation of her loss, the burden of which she is unable to shed by returning or redirecting the line of relationships towards a meaningful whole. The three black women have devised a new world of maternal bonds. They have buried their angst and pain under the cover of that love which they always longed to receive and shower. But Rebekka is not able to give a positive language to her mother-hunger. The vacuum created by her children’s death is not filled, and it bursts in her disturbed mental condition, which is reflected in her later behavioural problems. She is locked in the world of her personal grief due to biological and emotional loss as a mother. Her psychologically crippled state leaves her incapable to combat the physical loss. She cannot describe herself beyond the strict definition of a mother- biological mother. The short duration of her attachment with her children imprisons her more and more within her selfish emotions. However, fictional representations and slave narratives have proven that black women do not surrender their emotional strength to the forces of slavery even when their soul and spirit are crushed under the demands of a racist culture.

Domination of a woman by patriarchy showed its worst face in the marginalized state of black women. She was oppressed by both white and black men. The claws of slavery snipped them from their parental and marital relations. Crushed family structures, forced miscegenation, unfulfilled relationships- all these incidents played a major role in portraying her as a victim in the hands of race, class and
gender. But, her undying spirit in her maternal role throws a challenge to the existing dominating practices. Her contribution to the society is significantly visible in her efforts to create a network of ‘other mothers’ and ‘community mothers’, and extending her services to the community. Such practices and revival of new relationships invigorate the spirit to combat the forces that enslave the interior life of blacks. Gloria- Wade- Gayles has made a remarkable observation in her path-breaking autobiographical narrative, *Pushed Back to Strength: A Black Woman’s Journey Home* (1993), and observes that in the South of the forties: “surviving meant black and being black meant believing in our humanity, and retaining it in a world, in a world that denied we had it in the first place” (6). She extends this idea and notes that “The men in my family were butteresses and protectors, but it was the women who gave meaning to the expression ‘pushed back to strength’” (13). Studies and fictional characters have also proven that the strength of black women lay in her maternal power. Dysfunctional family structure and forced detachment from their children stimulate the desire to search for some space to shower natural instincts of love and care outside the restricted and limited zone of biological ties. Mostly, these incomplete narratives of life are woven with the thread of a common history shared by mothers and daughters as slave women and lessen the severity of physiological and psychological loss incurred by them.

Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* juxtaposes the weak white womanhood with the strong black motherhood. Rebekka fails and crumbles in the end after her husband’s death because she is governed by the controlling forces of patriarchy. Her subjugated personality is more defined by her position as the mistress of the Vaark household-the wife of Jacob Vaark. She is not the head of her family, but the second person after Jacob Vaark. She is the mistress and not the authoritative member of her family. It is important to quote Miriam Johnson to support the argument that Rebekka’s role as a wife weakened her womanly powers as a mother because, according to Johnson’s argument, it is the wife’s role that makes her secondary in a patriarchal culture. In comparison to this, in matrifocal cultures, it is a mother’s role which is more emphasized and marked by greater gender rights. Sethe, Eva, Baby Suggs and Mrs. MacTeer define themselves as mothers rather than as wives. Thus, they are able to step outside the boundaries created by patriarchy. They devise their own world of
authority where they consider themselves to be the sole person entrusted with
decision-making powers. Rebekka’s position, her instability, her emotional break –
down all are caused by her socio-cultural set up and its demands that subvert a
woman’s identity with its gender specific roles. Morrison’s novel has reversed the
position of black and white woman where the marginalized emerge as active and
authoritative, and the powerful are lowered down to the position of powerlessness.
She has showcased the significance of a mother’s power by describing both personal
and social destruction of Rebekka in contrast to the achievements of the other three
female characters at the same level and in the same context.

Sorrow, Florens, Lina- all these characters shape their subjectivity in
accordance with their relations with and positions as mothers or daughters. Through
the portrayal of a series of images, A Mercy also presents the deep relations between
biologically related and unrelated women as mothers and daughters. It is a sad novel
whose meaning lies in its pessimism. It encompasses all the strokes of Morrison’s art,
refined with her unique fictional techniques and themes. The novelist has hauntingly
captured the sigma of those mothers who have abandoned their children for their
better future or discovered their self through daring maternal acts. These dimensions
cannot be examined against the backdrop of the theories of white motherhood.
Morrison rejects the conventions through her disturbing, yet true depictions of frail
and stifled relations. It is the complexity of her fictional narratives and the web of
emotions that entangles people and forms a background to the silenced history of the
oppressed in her novels. This chapter has established a multifaceted view of
motherhood in A Mercy. Morrison does not create an idealized mother-child story.
The diverse truths encountered by the women characters expose the heterogeneous
experiences of motherhood during slavery or post-slavery. As discussed earlier,
mother-child bonds are not subject to biological ties only. These extended relations
among women, children and community thus help various women characters to
redefine and rename themselves.

Issues relating to feminist concerns like self-recognition, mother-child
relationship and friendship between females are some of the major thematic concerns
in Morrison’s fictions. If the bonds between Nel and Sula, Florens and Lina and Baby
Suggs and Sethe empower them to fight against the racial disparagement, then
Pecola’s and Florens’ separation and rejection from their mother leads to their psychic crumbling. Morrison’s tragic stories are a reflection of the intricate perspectives to structure and define their problematized stance. Her artistic style, narrative strategy and a capacity to revisit history in the stories set her apart from the conventional writers through her attempts to threaten the Eurocentric literary tradition by creating a specific black milieu through the socio-cultural backgrounds in her novels. She repositions theoretical agendas and presents a new awareness about the forgotten black past. It is the new communal structure formed by black women through the acts of restoring and nurturing a marginalized individual. While Alice Walker frames a radical Africanist concern in her writings, Morrison upholds those values which also reflect her awareness of the complex situations faced by African-Americans in unveiling the cultural conflicts. Her novels expose the real strength of black women and simultaneously present the unglazed picture of the atrocities borne by these women in their position as daughters and mothers. Such characters represent a new pattern which articulates black experience that is veiled and foreshadowed by the presence of the white structure. Thus, Lina, Florens, Sorrow, Florens’ mother— all the characters present a dynamic view of black women’s power when they experience the birth and revival of a new self. This serves as a testimony to Morrison’s theory of motherhood as a site of empowerment.
End Notes:

1. Stanlie James defines othermothering “as acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal”.

2. In contrast community mothers, “take care of the community. These women are typically past their child bearing years” (Wane, 112).
Works Cited:


