Conclusion

Yes Mother. I can see you are flawed. You have not hidden it from me. That is your greatest gift to me.

Alice Walker

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing*

Alice Walker’s words best exemplify the situation and stance of black women in their community. They are unconventional, real, mean, simple, realistic and often selfish. They shock us with their daring decisions and courageous acts. But they express themselves openly and without any shame, as if they are proud of their bold personality which redefines and gives a new definition to their womanliness and black femininity. Their identity is marked by their role and contribution more as mothers, than as wives. The less operating and weak patriarchy in black community subverts the normal order prevalent in a society by establishing the authority of black women through their influential roles. They are born in a society in which they are doomed to suffer humiliation, suffering and shame, but they display their undaunted courage by giving new meanings to their self and identity in various socio-cultural roles. Every response, every move, every act and every relation explicitly voices a distinct perspective of African womanist discourse which challenges the socially and culturally constructed ideology that images and portrays black woman, be it daughter, wife or mother, in negative pictures.

Black feminist writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Zora Neal Hurston have given a realistic presentation of black culture and heritage, thus strengthening next generations of black women with the gift of their ancestral power and traditional knowledge that has always been rooted in and sustained them with its rich culture. Many writers have in fact paid a tribute to their art and talent of constructing a privately owned small space where they can express their long-suppressed and demeaned identities. Their real-life stories, small incidents, moments
of joy and sorrow-all weave together to form narratives of pain and sorrow that heal the unspoken trauma of slavery and repair the fractured psyche through the process of story-telling.

The beauty and strength of Morrison’s narratives also rest in the portrayal of women characters with their display of audacious acts in the dark world of slavery. Such bleak, yet strong presentations position black women in the line of warriors who have celebrated their womanhood through their daily acts of endurance and resistance, posing a greater threat than black men to the white hegemonic society. Morrison also presents a similar phenomenon in her works when she portrays black women who are struggling to inherit their culture and connect themselves to their traditional properties of womanhood.

The present study has examined varied depictions of characters that reflect the strength of matriarchal power and matriline, which has been working across generations in the African-American community. Although Toni Morrison’s novels theorize motherhood as a site of power, her unconventional portrayal of motherwork is deeply rooted in her ideology to consider motherhood as a site of resistance and empowerment. Such rearticulation gives rise to a new kind of consciousness, liberating black mothers to perform the four tasks of motherwork—preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing, and healing. Through these four tasks, mothers have to be protective, nurturing, transmitters of culture and healers to those adults whose alienated and lonely childhood leaves them psychologically maim and weak with their painful memories.

Motherhood cannot be restrictively defined as a form of resistance. Its meaning can be expanded to explain it as an act that integrates black community. But as critics on motherhood have also noted, motherhood in the dominant ideology is not regarded in this way; rather mothering is a private enterprise. Compared and contrasted to this kind of presentation, we have Morrison’s standpoint that defines motherhood through its cultural and political significance. She can be read as a theorist who ”reworks, rethinks, and reconfigures the concerns and strategies of African-American and in particular, black women’s emancipation in America” (O’Reilley, 171). According to
Morrison, the power of motherhood and empowerment of mothers makes it possible for them to build a better world for their children as well as for themselves.

Morrison’s works and characters, however, can seldom be analyzed under her theoretical framework. Some of the characters like Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Consolata in *Paradise* and Therese in *Tar Baby* exemplify the maternal powers theorized by Morrison. On the other hand, characters like Mrs. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye* are an embodiment of the significance of cultural bearing. Eva Peace, Mrs. MacTeer and Sethe are mothers whose preservative love confirms the importance of love and mothering for a child and also warns the reader of the grave ramifications of its absence in their adulthood.

An examination of these issues can also prove that the existing gap between Morrison’s vision and her depiction of motherhood mirrors certain failures of the novelist in painting a strong picture of mothers in her fictional works. We can also view it in this manner: the gap created by the novelist is a way to highlight the significance of what is lost due to socio-cultural reasons and show its value by emphasizing its ramifications in an individual’s progress. The loss that is incurred by an inability to connect to these memories underscores the cultural importance of the institution of mothering.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison personifies the devastating causes and consequences of a mother’s loss of ‘funk’. To be a critic of the maternal relations projected in the novel, it becomes essential to critically evaluate the social vision in the novel. The character of Pauline, as Karen Carmean observes, wants to confirm to a role defined by others, and in confusing self with role, Pauline denies any possibility of growth. [She represents] many who, in adopting White values and standards of behavior, deny their essential values-substituting false- even destructive- standards. (21)

Morrison selects and elucidates upon the core themes of black motherhood and develops a new ideology which empowers African-American women and infuses in them the spirit of resistance. Although motherhood is central and sacred to African-American culture, motherhood becomes the locus of oppression for Pauline when she feels herself bound to be the caretaker of her family. Drawing upon the contemporary
black womanists' thoughts on motherhood, we can say that in the African- American tradition, mothers and the task of mothering makes it possible for them to fulfil the physical and psychological well-being of their children.

According to critics and theorists, sharing traumatic events through the tradition of storytelling relieves the pain of trauma victims. But Pecola’s childhood is filled with the trauma of rejection and abandonment. Added to this, she is also deprived of any benefits of oral narratives through which she could have lessened her unshared and unsaid pain and which could have rooted her in the soil of black women’s tradition and culture that is acquired through narrating and listening to the stories of the past. In a very intricate manner, Morrison has tried to show that a positive matriline is vital for daughters and its absence can lead to the formation of displaced and depreciated personalities. The Bluest Eye presents the idea that mothers should maintain a strong authentic self so that they may nurture the same life-force in their daughters also. In her article “Difficult Survival: Mothers and Daughters in The Bluest Eye”, Joyce Pettis argues that Pauline fails in nurturing her daughter because she herself is unnurtured. The disassociations finally make Pauline vulnerable to the dominant and white hegemonic culture that leads to her denigration as a black woman.

Maternal nurturance is an immunization process through which the mothers seek to teach their children how to protect themselves in a racist world. Finally, through cultural bearing, the mother imparts to her children African-American values of funk and the ancient properties that enable them to form a proud and strong African American identity (O’Reilley, 55). Thus, The Bluest Eye calls its readers’ attention towards the despair of a mother who is not able to fulfil the tasks of motherhood, rather than depicting motherhood as a site of power and resistance that empowers black women.

If Morrison’s first novel revolves around the loss of motherline and maternal failure, her fifth novel Beloved describes the ruptures and disruptions of motherline which are usually occasioned by assimilation, migration and slavery. Beloved vindicates Morrison’s idea and theory of African – American motherline, where though slavery disrupts its structure, a reunion of mother-daughter relations and the
development of a new bond signify its repair. The bond that is severed in *The Bluest Eye* is radically repaired in *Beloved*.

Morrison argues that mothers must identify with the ancestral properties of African-American motherline in order to love themselves as black people and to teach the same to their children in order to develop a strong and proud sense of black identity (O’Reilley, 33). Baby Suggs also contributes to this enterprise by teaching to her people how to love their body and soul. Her role demonstrates that mothering is not a privatized occupation and nurturance of children is viewed as the collective work of a larger community. These West-African cultural practices are retained by the enslaved African-Americans and originate from a distinct tradition of mothering in which the custom of community mothering is emphasized more than maternal/biological mothering.

*Beloved* forces the reader to read between the lines of the narration of dehumanization of slaves and above all, it reflects that the recognition of Sethe’s self lies only in the rights of motherhood. For her, the act of infanticide is a renunciation of motherhood. She denies every truth that is not associated to her identity as a mother. Thus, she defines herself and claims her subjectivity as a mother only.

Speaking of *Beloved* in her book *The Mother-Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch writes: “When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children’s lives, no voice in their upbringing” (196). Hirsch suggests that Morrison is not writing about slavery or slave mothers only. Then why has she merged slavery and motherhood in the novel? The answer to the question lies in the thin line which is drawn between a woman and a mother by the novelist. The most noticeable aspect of the novel is Sethe’s decision to kill only her second child, Beloved. A close study of the novel would reveal that the reason lies in the rape of her maternity. She would not have killed her daughter if the slave catcher had not come. Her act is a blow to the master’s authority but her decision is motivated by her ‘thick love’. In fractions of seconds, Morrison’s Sethe as a woman is finally overcome by Sethe, the mother.
Before Morrison’s *Beloved* entered the domain of Black Literature, many feminist writers had already attempted to depict the mind and spirit of black women. Lee Alfred Wright in her book *Identity, Family and Folklore in African American Literature* writes about the trope of ‘Good Mother’. In the chapter “The Good Mother Tradition”, Wright remarks that this figure has become a major trope in evaluating mothers in African- American literature. The slave mother is portrayed as a self-sacrificing human who can surpass all sketched boundaries to protect her children. The tradition of ‘Good Mother’ has not only led to the portrayal of a sacrificing mother, but also encompasses the portrayal of mothers who neglect this tradition and abandon their children. Alice Walker’s *Meridian* exemplifies the trope of ‘Good Mother’ through its female protagonist, who goes for abortion and joins a college for further studies to be a social activist in Civil Rights Movement.

The trope of ‘Good Mother’ is not only applicable to African- American culture but can be applied to any culture. ‘Good Mothers’ are produced in extremely adverse and oppressive conditions where mothers have to fulfil their tasks in hostile social, political and cultural conditions. The character of the main protagonist Jashoda in Mahashweta Devi’s *The Breast Stories* can be illustrated as a transcultural example of ‘Good Mother’. Jashoda nurses and feeds the children of rich families in order to sustain her family. She dies of breast cancer as a result of excessive feeding. In this story also, a woman resists the patriarchal structure as a mother and stands against the antagonistic conditions to serve the needs of her family. Her stance as a mother bestows on her a sense of pride and self-worth to counter and survive such harsh conditions of poverty.

Morrison’s novels are also replete with expressions of motherhood, which are enriching and overpowering. But her mothers are unable to attain the expected socio-cultural roles and behaviour. Elaine Showalter’s observation about mothers must be significant to be noted here. She writes, “Children are the compensation for female surrender” and that “childbirth is not a victory, it is an acceptance of compensations of giving in and giving up” (305-6). These oppositional dimensions of motherhood emerge as completely altered forms of mothering when they have to operate within the confines of a racist society.
Morrison’s fictions resonate with paternalistic family structures. Therefore, black women in her works are portrayed as economically and emotionally marginalized characters. *Sula* exemplifies that motherlove is a lethal combination of economic and emotional problems. The character and role of Eva Peace, the main protagonist, proves that the black woman has to sacrifice herself both physically and emotionally for the survival of her children. But, the irony of her life is that although burdened with sincere and grave concerns, she is always accused of not loving her children.

The truth of failed motherline continues from Eva and stretches to Hannah and Sula. It is a story which demonstrates the ramifications of the above mentioned maternal failures on two generations. While studying Hannah’s character, we need to consider that she is not preserved, nurtured, healed and has not experienced any cultural bearing. Emphasizing on the values transmitted to a daughter from the mother, Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*: “The nurture of daughters in a patriarchy calls for strong sense of self- nurture in mother” (247). Morrison argues that parents, in particular mothers, must identify with the ancestral memory and ancient properties of African- American motherline in order to love themselves (O’ Reilley,33).

As a revisionist, Morrison redefines the traditional form of motherhood in her presentation of African- American culture. The bond between Nel and her mother Helene Wright displays a bizarre consequence of possessive love or, to use in Sethe’s language, “thick love”. Mothers are expected to guide their daughters, train them in their feminine ways, help them in realizing their duties in life and also set a role model for their daughters to follow. A similar ideology is also presented by Morrison as the traditional aspect of African -American motherhood. But why does a mother’s love and care twist and mould a daughter’s personality in such a modus that she fails to recognize her inner strength to retain what was hers? It seems tha the reason lies in bringing out that inner strength which is essential to balance emotional and psychological development. Love is also shown to have its ramifications. Helene’s love, though it seems to be a torch bearer to her daughter, weakens her daughter Nel’s spirit. Her mother’s excessive concern confines her body in feminine constraints. Free
expression, fulfilment of desires and a bold personality can never form a part of Nel’s character.

Nel and Sula’s relationship in the novel takes a turn towards exploring a new realm of fresh relationships between black females, i.e. sisterhood. Morrison’s purpose behind such relational analysis can be to go into another dimension of motherhood where the two girls who cannot find completeness in bonding with their mothers, seek to fill the vacuum in their life through an unknown and unmapped rapport between each other.

All the novels of Morrison are discourses on marriage and motherhood that is achieved by mirroring the failed and diverse experiences and responses of her characters in diverse circumstances. She seeks to paint her characters in their search for their ‘me- ness’ and their self. For instance, Sula in Sula is like Jadine in Tar Baby, who is seeking to achieve self-determination and self-definition. This evident in Sula’s reply to Nel: “I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me” (143). On Sula’s return to Medallion after a long absence of ten years, Eva questions her: “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you” (92). Sula answers: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Throughout the text, Sula’s views on marriage and motherhood prove that the two institutions seem subservient and dominating for her due to their demands, because they govern a woman’s personality. She disassociates and disconnects from her own matriline and lives with her own identity. Her self gives her strength to live alone without suffering an emotional desertion as experienced by a daughter in The Bluest Eye and Jazz. However disconnected from her motherline, as Marriane Hirsch observes, she is left “[with] nowhere to go” (185).

There are many instances in Morrison’s works where motherhood is not seen as a site for empowerment. This ideology is presented in the images of failed mothering in novels like The Bluest Eye, where a black mother is unable to fulfil her tasks of mothering and there are hints that her failed mothering is caused by her assimilation in the values of the dominant culture. As a result of this, a mother psychologically abandons her daughter. For Pauline, disconnection is a result of migration and assimilation and for her daughter, disconnection arises from the lack of
maternal nurturance (O’Reilley, 58). In a similar manner, narratives of loss and disconnections are also linked and symbolically represented through the female reproductive experiences in *Tar Baby*. Very similar to Pauline’s experiences are Jadine’s experiences in *Tar Baby*. Her fecund maternal body embodies her hatred for motherhood by representing her disconnection from her motherline, which is the main cause of her rejection of the moral values of motherline.

As it is evident, Morrison’s mothers are slave mothers who are marginalized and subaltern characters who are either fighting or accepting their situations silently or resiliently. This kind of depiction is done with a concern and consideration of their historical conditions and the contemporary socio-cultural scenario. It becomes imperative for us to study the psychological changes in black mothers to notice serious transformations in their mothering in the light of their cultural identity that is ultimately formed by the ideologies of ruling slave society. Morrison also suggests that mothering, as a resilient practice, is not only against patriarchal motherhood, but often against the white supremacist society. This idea also challenges the prevalent belief that mothering is a private and emotional sphere, proved in its definitions of the new modes of mothering where women form a network outside of and beyond biological ties.

African-American motherhood aims “to develop a belief in their own empowerment [while] providing a basis for self-actualization” (Jenkins, 206). However, in Morrison’s fictions, mothers, despite the maternal power, mother and raise their children in adverse conditions. It is a battle that they fight for fulfilling the tasks of motherhood. Mothers in her fictions embody the challenging projections of mother-child association, be it Ruth in *Song of Solomon*, Margaret in *Tar Baby* or the female characters in *Paradise*. For instance, all the characters mentioned hereby display a set of problematic relationships. For instance, in the case of Margret in *Tar Baby*, it is her abusive maternal behaviour. Instances of failed mothering also embody an act of resistance against patriarchy. O’Reilley notes:

> Mothers in Morrison’s fiction also confront racism on behalf of their children, also challenge their own oppression in the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Resistance to patriarchal motherhood is conveyed in the many instances of failed maternal roles and fractured relationships in the novel.
Paradise, Ruth’s deviant maternal practices in particular the “late” nursing of her son, and Margaret’s abuse of her son Michael. (118)

Morrison shows a disquieting face of maternal love, as evident through her writings. A son burnt to death; a child whose throat is slit; abused, abandoned, neglected, raped and beaten daughters—such ghastly events permeate all her seven novels. In her first five novels, she has tried to depict what happens when mothers try to empower their children, while the last two novels dramatize the process of healing wounds, once they are inflicted due to the pressures of white capitalistic society. They are an intense dramatization of the stories of those children who are unmothered, neglected and suffer due to the lack of nurturance, preservation and cultural bearing. Her last two novels, Paradise and Jazz, document the process of healing when children in these novels reconnect to their lost or dead mother-ﬁgure through mourning or remembering them. These novels are replete with characters that are healed as adults and thus conﬁrm the signiﬁcance of this process.

Morrison’s fictions are both a warning and record. They counsel the readers and in an apocalyptic world of unloved and uncared for children, they enlighten us with the power of maternal love. She applauds the power of woman’s motherhood towards the achievement of subjective and cultural changes which are desperately required in the contemporary scenario and also demand a distinct womanly power in the role of mother that should be acknowledged and distinguished. In each of the novels of Morrison, we have disconnections from motherline, its aftermaths, and finally the healing of traumatized children.

Morrison’s novels, The Bluest Eye, Sula and A Mercy, aim at undermining, disassembling and criticizing the storylines which qualify black women to record their own life stories of family, beauty, motherlove and female fulﬁlment in accordance with the traditional properties of motherline.

To conclude, we can say that although motherhood is a private affair, it cannot be judged as unconditioned by socio-political influences. As discussed earlier in the previous chapters in detail, there lies a wide difference between mothering in the white middle class’ and black women’s world of mothering. As a representative writer of motherhood, Toni Morrison joins a list of distinguished feminist writers in
American literature. But the radical nature of her presentation makes her a unique novelist in the world of contemporary feminist discourse. Morrison’s diverse characters ranging from Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* to the characters in *Paradise* collectively exemplify a distinct picture of a community which functions on the principles of mothering and eradicates all myths about black motherhood to form a new picture of African-American mothering that springs from the roots of black tradition.

The new relationships born through associations beyond blood-relations in Morrison’s novels depict the collaboration between mothers and children, especially mother-daughter. It educates them to combat against the powerful societal conditions that continue to force fathers out of home/work; that push brothers and boyfriends and sons into prisons and/or to drugs and that make it necessary to raise babies without any support. This defence mechanism is clearly evident in maternal practices which are aimed at teaching physical and mental survival to their children.

The plight of a girl-child like Pecola, the loneliness of Florens and Lina, the helplessness of Mrs. MacTeer—all combine with her ideas on maternal concern to be later compared with the outbursts of anger and fierce love of Sethe, counterpoised to the sacredness and profaneness of Baby Suggs’ love for the community. Also, Pauline’s colonized self juxtaposed to the matriarchal authority of Eva Peace and Hannah’s overt sexuality, Nel’s daughterly submission and wifely duties, Sorrow’s moral transformation, epitomize the characters who either suffer the loss borne by their disconnections from their motherline or empower themselves by forming new bonds to liberate themselves from their biological bonds. But Morrison also frames unusual relational ties where mothers either dislike or hate their daughters for their colour or personality, burn their sons to death to give salvation or kill their daughters to let them rest in eternal peace. All the characters are dramatized in intensely grim situations.

Even after a deep critical understanding of Morrison’s novels and an attempt to unweave the web of relations, the reader is left to grapple with the nuance-layered portrayal of the world of unmothered children in her novels that accord a new paradigm to the definitions of motherhood. Morrison’s novels echo with
multiplicities: multiple analyses, multiple subjectivities, multiple themes and discourses, multiple memories and multiple perspectives. They step out of the ambit of traditional slave narratives, seeking to define protest and dissent in a more specific manner. Her dark and bold representations ultimately show that motherhood no longer remains a convenient term to be understood and explored in simplistic terms.

In the words of O’ Reilley:

Morrison’s fiction thus both warns and counsels: in its apocalyptic vision of a world of unmothered children it serves notice of the importance of mothering, while in its theme of deliverance it gives us causes hope. Morrison applauds the power of motherhood to achieve the personal and cultural changes so desperately and urgently needed in our world today; as well, she demands that such power be acknowledged and celebrated. (172)

It is through her fictions that Morrison foregrounds the idea that the real strength of a black woman lies in her motherhood. Through the fulfilment of her maternal functions, she takes an opportunity to reflect her true socio-cultural powers which are not given to her, but are claimed and asserted by her even in the most hostile situations. The story of each of the novels of Morrison revolves around characters whose lives have become narratives of the journey of assimilation, loneliness, detachment, unspoken grief and unseen wounds. Above all, her novels aver the significance of cultural bearing and its contribution to the healthy development of black women, their families and community, which forms an integral part in developing and fostering new relations.
Works Cited:


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