Abstract of the Thesis

Introduction.

The word trauma means “wound”. In medical science it means “a wound or an external injury”, or a “psychic injury”. It also refers to a psychological injury that is caused by an emotional shock of some repressed memory. Trauma and literature are connected to each other as the traumatic effects on fictional characters also affect the readers while they read it. The present chapter analyses the trauma theory, and analyses slave women as mothers, under the critical lens of this theory.

The introductory chapter evaluates the position of black women as marginalized characters and witnesses to the written records of the traumatic experiences of slavery. A study of their subjugated state grows even more complex and diverse when their life conditions are studied in the racial context. Human relationships and social structures lose their meaning and the status of women becomes clearer as more dehumanized and degraded. The pressures of white hegemonic society make the satisfactory conduct of normal relationships more difficult to achieve. In such a scenario, black writers, especially women writers, have made serious attempts to present life from their perspective, as experienced by them as girls, mothers and daughters.

Mothering and motherhood are dominant themes in postmodern writings. Feminists study it as a source of power as well as oppression. But there exists a wide difference between the Eurocentric and Afrocentric framework of motherhood. Many black feminist critics and thinkers have propounded theories that delve into an examination of black motherhood. According to Patricia Hill Collins, mothers can find maternal roles to be dominating. In contrast to this, there is the second conventional idea where they can also see it as a role that completes the existence of a woman. This ideology has been challenged by white women writers, who believe that motherhood can also give pleasure and satisfaction when women choose not to be mothers. But maternal roles of black women cannot be analyzed under any of these three paradigms.
Toni Morrison’s novels deviate from the usual form of representation in slave narratives and other black literature by their unconventional and unacceptable array of the interplay of emotions among different people. The most common theme running through her works revolves around mother-child bonds, and especially, mother-daughter relationship. Her characters shock or startle the reader by their violent actions—sometimes manifest and sometimes silent. Motherhood sometimes becomes sacred as a source of empowerment, and sometimes it is debased when it is seen as a mode of oppression. The nuance-layered expressions are interpreted in accordance with the socio-cultural and economic condition of slave women as mothers. The first chapter thus provides the research background with its opening on an introduction to the trauma theory, and moves on to a discussion of the varied explanations of motherhood in varied socio-cultural contexts.

“But she’s black”: Colonized Motherhood in *The Bluest Eye*.

Jean Paul-Sartre’s Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* talks about psychology of the colonized. Sartre states that a Negro looks at himself through the other person’s eyes and makes of himself what he sees from there. Morrison’s first novel justifies this maxim. The novel’s story revolves around such characters as are trapped within the web of colonization. Their failure to de-colonize their self pushes them into the realm of non-identity and self-hatred, which are intensified by the scars of a deformed psyche and fractured relations.

Morrison has pictured the mother-daughter relationship as the depiction of generationally transmitted shame and trauma of dejection borne by the omnipresent white gaze which is internalized by members of the black community. In The Bluest Eye, the characters who exemplify it best are Pauline and Pecola—the mother and daughter. Through their relationship, the novelist initiates the theme that is taken up in her subsequent novels also by emphasizing the politicized slogan: *Black is Beautiful*.

The mother-daughter bond between Pauline and Pecola presents a bizarre face of a black mother-daughter pair, where the mother fails to decolonize her ‘self’
to enable herself to love her child. The serious effects are reflected in the daughter, who turns insane in pursuit of beautiful blue eyes that would help her to acquire the love of her parents, especially her mother, who finds her ugly because she is black. The innocent girl’s crushed psychological state symbolizes the failure of a black woman who is weak in associating herself with her ancestral memories and ‘motherline’; who has no memories of her childhood to cherish and cannot liberate herself from the gaze of the white hegemonic world.

The second pair of Mrs Mac Teer and her two daughters- Claudia and Frieda- presents an inverse picture. The pair is a fair example of protective love that proves its effects on the children by teaching them how to resist the power of the white hegemonic gaze. In contrast to the above mentioned characters’ association, this set of human relationship is bestowed with the beauty of respect for “funk” and black culture and tradition in the lives of black women against the backdrop of the white racist society.

“Your love is too thick”: Beloved and The Heart of Maternal Darkness

Toni Morrison’s fifth novel Beloved is a heart rending story, inspired from a real life incident in the life of an ex-slave, Margaret Garner, who killed her two children with a shovel in an attempt to run away from the bondage of her slave master. The story is not of a black woman or other black characters, but centres the astounding courage of a black mother, who hurts herself in her attempt to outhunt the master. The pivot of the novel is this spirit of a black woman who decides to kill her daughter to provide her a peaceful life in grave, rather than letting her suffer in the inferno of slavery if she is allowed to live.

The protagonist is Sethe, an ex-slave, and the other main characters are her two daughters Beloved and Denver, her old slave companion Paul D., and her motherly mother-in-law- Baby Suggs. The strands of selfish love, courage, revenge, guilt, regrets, disassociations, confessions, unconditional love and communal bonds, all move through one another’s weave to design the fabric of Beloved. Sethe’s love
proves harmful when it possesses her mind in such a powerful grip that she restricts her vision of herself to her motherhood. Defined only as a mother, Sethe presents another dark side of the power of blackness, if loved and respected by black people. Her relations with her daughters prove that white forces can crush the body of slave women, but not their spirit, which always preserves the spark of maternity in them. This chapter is a detailed study of the trauma of physical and psychic abuse inflicted on the body and soul of a slave woman, who determinedly lives for her children and is ready to kill and be killed to ensure their survival. The horrific descriptions of her abuse unearth those quiet corners of slave women’s history that are left unexplored by many writers till date.

The second major mother-figure is Baby Suggs- an epitome of communal love and peace. Her stance throws more light on the significance of women’s power as mother and the sacredness of her contributions that revive the dead spirit of self-love and self-esteem by teaching slaves to love themselves, and to accept their body with its colour. Her role best exemplifies West-African practices of motherhood where women are respected for their contributions towards the community. Baby’s character is that of a preacher, an ‘other mother’ and ‘community mother’ who defines mothering beyond biological bonds. Other than these major characters, the role of a white woman Amy Denver, Sethe’s old companion Ella and her maid Nan also throw light on the varied bonds and associations between women, as friends or out of an invisible bond that exists between them as women, which develops their understanding and sensivity for each other.

The chapter explores the transformations in maternal roles due to the changing socio-cultural context that is finally responsible for shaping the personality of these women as mothers. It also proves Morrison’s theory of motherhood that mothering is a source of empowerment for black women. But Beloved transgresses all conventional boundaries when Sethe delimits the concept of her ‘self’ as a woman and restricts her self-identity to that of a mother who is vested with all power to decide her child’s life and death too.
"Mamma did you ever love us?" Associations and Rejections in *Sula*

This pattern of human relationships stretches through all the major novels of Morrison, including *Sula*. Her second novel *Sula* is the story of two girls Nel Wright and Sula Peace, working across the third generation of mother-daughter relations. The major character is Eva Peace and it is her lineage that forms the next generation in the story. The second story running parallel to the is story is of the middle-class Wright family with the mother Helene Wright, raised by her grandmother, and her own daughter Sula Peace - the third generation of the Wright family.

The first set of relations running through the poor Peace family is yet another picture that reminds us of a bold matriarch in the character of Eva, who proves that mothers cannot be fully romanticized or marginalized. She is a woman who accepts the demands of her situation and reacts accordingly. Her decision to leave her children with her neighbours and arrange for their livelihood also raises her to the pedestal of ‘good mother’ who is selfless and can go to any extent to nurture her children. Her qualities prove that black women do not have the luxury of motherhood while sitting and playing with their children as non-economically productive females and mothers. Eva arms herself with the same powers as Sethe, which finds its perfect articulation in her relationship with her son Plum. She becomes a tragic figure in the end when she fails to inculcate the necessary survival instincts in her son and also loses her daughter in the rising flames, which symbolically engulf all her maternal love and concern.

The second pair of Wright women dramatizes another story of the negative influences of possessive maternal care and concern on the personality of a daughter who ultimately proves weak to hold anything that is hers in her life, because she has never learned to be self-sufficient. Helene Wright and Nel Wright, the mother and daughter, are personifications of the “cult of true womanhood” in their community. They suggest the effects of a daughter’s failure to understand her mother’s situation and a mother’s weakness in being a strong guide to her daughter. Nel’s dislike for her mother, her discomfort in her own house, her final loss of her husband because of Sula, all echo her submissiveness and passivity that she has developed in her mother’s attempt to make her a socially and culturally acceptable woman.
Sula has a very daughter-centric mother-daughter relationship in all the three generations. The novel also deals with a new face of bonding through the bond shared by the two black girls whose character and personality clearly reflects their mother’s influence. It also denotes the significance of this newly framed bond of sisterhood that provides them a chance to find a mother surrogate in each other to fill the vacuum of mother-love and association created due to the distances and disassociations between mothers and daughters.

The chapter attempts to critically analyze the positive and negative effects of mother-love, where it can damage the identity if it can also do just the opposite. All the female characters try to frame and shape their own subjectivities in the wake of new relationships created and old relations distorted due to the socio-cultural factors imposed by the white hegemonic society.


Morrison’s ninth novel A Mercy is another important stroke in her art of painting human relationships. The novel dramatizes the story of three women slaves who are either abandoned or separated from their families because of slave trade. Their destiny brings them together under one roof in the house of Jacob Vaark, a Dutch tradesman. Each character has a distinct sense of isolation and loneliness as they are geographically dislocated and uprooted from their own land, carrying the burden of a displaced self. The three slave women are Lina, Sorrow and Florens.

Florens is a girl who is sold as a slave to Jacob by her mother. Her journey from the beginning to the end of the story gives a chance to the reader to explore the significance of love and care in a girl’s life. Her inability to understand the reasons for her mother’s decision leaves her in a dilemma and in the need to search for maternal love, which is fulfilled after her associations with Lina—another slave who lives with an insatiable hunger to be a mother to a child. Both of them seek a complete self after forming the mother-daughter bond that fills some vacuum in the minds of these females. Their roles exemplify the power of the maternal instinct that
enables a female to grapple with her incomplete identity, once she develops these lost or misplaced bonds of love and care outside her private concerns.

The third character Sorrow exemplifies the maxim that a woman is complete only after she becomes a mother. After giving birth to a daughter, she appears as a morally and socially transformed character with a new understanding of her own self, who redirects her life and gives it a new meaning by structuring it as a mother to a daughter. She comes out of her disturbed mental state caused by her isolation, because of which she is also withdrawn to her self-devised world with her companion Twin.

Sorrow defies all the conventional definitions of a slave woman with a contrast that she presents to the fourth female character Rebekka- the wife of Jacob Vaark and the mistress of the Vaark household. Rebekka’s children die one by one a few days after they are born, and she is left alone after her husband’s death. As a white woman who has a restricted understanding of mothering and motherhood, her restricted capacity to love does not allow her to repair her severed and alienated personality by forming new relations with the other characters. She is too weak to raise herself to a higher position like the other black women who heal their scarred self by entirely new and empowering associations with the other women.

A Mercy sets new dimensions of mother-daughter relations that revive the dead souls of slave women and upholds the maxim that African practices of mothering consider motherhood to be the most sacred mode of empowerment.

Conclusion

The present research has examined mother-child relationship in the four novels of Toni Morrison. The novelist has created characters in whose deformed personalities can be traced the psychological effects of the loss of maternal bonds in an individual’s life. Morrison’s novels depart from the conventional patterns of the portrayal of human relations, and unearth the quiet corners of slave women’s life. Her female characters and their stance as mothers have proven the power of matriline and matriarchy running across generations in the African-American community. Her
storyline and its characters are structured in such manner that motherhood not only defines itself as an act of resistance, but becomes a source of integration for the black community. The power of female bonding redefines and rearticulates mothering and motherhood, giving rise to a new kind of freedom to slave mothers that finally liberates them from the conventional patterns of motherhood.

This chapter also emphasizes the significance of maternal bonds in an individual’s life by depicting the results of its loss on an individual’s personality. Varied and nuance-layered interpretations and presentations running through the novel aptly justify that mothers and maternal powers are crucial to the integration of the community in the long run of socio-cultural progress. Multiple perspectives and interpretations define resistance in a more specific and individual manner, and convince the readers that motherhood is no longer a convenient term to be understood and defined in simplistic terms.