

Demystifying the Myth of Motherhood: Toni Morrison's Revision of African-American Mother Stereotypes

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Abstract—Black maternity has culturally and historically been mythologized and black mothers stereotyped. A revisionist Morrison challenges the validity of the historical documentation of black culture and especially the role and significance of women in constructing this culture. Her revision of the concept of the black motherhood is a major step toward correcting the historical records concerning black maternity which is just another form of victimization of the black woman, society' exploitation of the mother-child bond.

Index Terms—Black culture, exploitation, maternity, revision.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the characterization of black women has been basically depicted in terms of their maternal role, a defined role which has been imposed on women as their sole source of identity by the society. While Toni Morrison sees motherhood as an important experience for women, she does not limit women's roles in the society to motherhood, nor does she restrict motherhood to biological maternity. Indeed, for Morrison, mothers are first and foremost human beings with distinct identities, individuals who can have the potential --in favorable circumstances--to realize that motherhood and individuality are not mutually exclusive. Sethe in *Beloved* eventually begins to recognize the value of her own selfhood and Violet in *Jazz* achieves a unique sense of peace and tranquility which indicates her self-confidence as an individual. Thus, to expose the inadequacy of the socially defined roles of mothers, Morrison populates her novels with atypical mother figures who are searching to attain some sense of individuality and self-worth in a world which denies them these values.

Black maternity has culturally and historically been mythologized and black mothers stereotyped because, as Barbara Christian asserts, such idealized images have served as "a content for some other major dilemma or problem the society cannot solve" (2). Such myths delineate black mothers as matriarchal figures, superbly strong and protective, and at the same time, selfless, all embracing, demanding nothing or little, and totally self-sacrificing creatures whose identities are inseparable from their nurturing services. Morrison's mother figures tend to subvert these assumptions dictated by the society. The majority of her mother figures are often independent, strong, determined (to a degree that they are sometimes abusive), and self-seeking. Thus, Morrison's

portrayal of motherhood, in conflict with the prevailing notion which tends to idealize motherhood, questions the social construction of matriarchy and maternity which often fails to perceive the identity and individuality of a mother apart from her child.

II. DISCUSSION

A revisionist Morrison challenges the validity of the historical documentation of black culture and especially the role and significance of women in constructing this culture. According to Changizi and Ghasemi: "Going back to the idea of subversion, one of the political reasons behind the writing of so many novels by African-Americans was and is to fight the Euro-American hegemony and discourse, and white stereotypes of blackness. In *beloved*, the popular race-related prejudices used by the white slaveholders have been addressed. One is the benevolence of the Whites in the sense that most of the white masters treated their slaves with compassion and kindness, and that the cases of cruel ones like the schoolmaster are rare" (3-4). Her revision of the concept of the black motherhood is a major step toward correcting the historical records concerning black maternity which is just another form of victimization of the black woman, society' exploitation of the mother-child bond. Essentially the aura of black maternity, born out of the system of slavery, developed as a result of the inevitable separation of fathers (black slaves or white owners) from their children. In the absence of unavailability of fathers, mothers became the only link which identified the black slaves' parental heritage. The ideology defining black matriarchy, rooted in the slavery system and subsequently a cultural fixture in the black communities, has peculiar properties. One such property as Judith Wilt has put it "is the myth of the black earth mother, indestructible under the heaviest load" (135). This ideology has served to position black mothers in restrictive roles and has denied them the potential for individual growth and autonomy.

One of the great merits of Morrison's portrayals of mothers is their realistic depiction. As complex and diverse as life itself, the likes of Mrs. McTeer (*Their Bluest Eye*), Eva, Helene, Hannah, Nel (*Sula*), Pilate, Ruth (*Song of Solomon*), Baby Suggs and Sethe (*Beloved*) attest to the uniqueness and individuality of mothers. However, Morrison insists that what makes these women remarkable individuals rather than types are their actions and reactions in the time of adversity. Forced by an oppressive social system which considers them only as the nurturer, protector, and servant of their children, they go to any length to perform their motherly duties, even by self-mutilation or infanticide. Yet, what distinguishes Morrison's mothers from the stereotyped mother figures is their attempt at determining the course of their own and their children's

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destinies. By resisting to conform to the definitions imposed on them as stereotypes and rejecting the socially accepted notions of motherhood, Morrison's mother figures refuse to be solely their children's nurturing sources and by showing an awareness of the options open to them, they are able to recognize the value of their own individuality.

True to life and challenging the socially idealized roles of mothers, Morrison's mothers are not passive, but face the bitter realities of the racial existence which is much too present in Morrison's novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, for example, poverty shapes, influences, and conditions the close and loving mother-child relationship and leads to a negligence bordering abuse. However, it is the strength of Mrs. McTeer's character that provides a source of survival for her daughters. Pauline Breedlove who lacks this strength and is alienated from her community rejects her children, denying them any means of survival. Pauline can only succeed in passing on to her children her own distorted vision and self-loathing – a destructive legacy: "into her son she beat a fear a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of people, fear of life" (*The Bluest Eye* 102). William Grier argues that the issue of the low self-esteem of many black girls can be linked to the role that the dominate culture and black community play in the devaluation of the worth of black womanhood. He maintains that measured against the criteria of the ideology of womanhood, young girls see themselves as the "antithesis of American beauty." Added to that is "a discouraging, depreciating mother-family-community environment" which pushes them towards the development of a "damaged self-concept" which might virtually impair and retard the development of a positive self-image" (33). This distorted image of self has damaged Pauline and been passed on to Pecola to totally erase her identity and annihilate her existence.

Though abandonment by fathers as a result of social and economical oppression is a general case in Morrison's novels, it is abandonment by mothers which is considered by the community as unforgivable. Morrison shows how mothers, who are left with no resources, are considered responsible for the survival and maintenance of the integrity of the family by a society which is highly critical of any mother who chooses to cross the set boundaries of this alleged motherhood. Morrison's novels raise such concerns as: can any woman fulfill herself without being destroyed or judged? Trudier Harris poses a similar question: "Must all women be subsumed under some community standards, or ostracized if they do not adhere to such standards" (*Fiction and Folklore* 188). Morrison's investigation into the issue of motherhood indicates that mothers do not follow uniform definitions and set boundaries; instead, there is a keen awareness of the fundamental contradictions of black motherhood, a very significant issue aptly put by Patricia Hill Collins:

African-American communities value motherhood, but the Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal cost. The range of Black women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect motherhood's contradictory nature. (133)

Morrison's preoccupation with the theme of motherhood is

indicative of the significance of maternity, in her novels, as an integral part of a woman's state of being. As Robert Staples has noted, in the African-American community, "motherhood represents maturity and the fulfillment of one's function as a woman" (153). Morrison, however, questions the purpose of the lives of women such as Sula and Jadine (*Tar Baby*) who have chosen not to become mothers. By showing that both characters seem to be suffering from a sense of loss in their lives, Morrison poses important questions such as: is maternity a necessary condition for a woman's fulfillment in life? And what would happen to the concept of the family if young women choose to be as free and independent as Sula and Jadine? (Even the self-proclaimed individualistic Sula begins to show signs of domesticity and dependence on Ajax whose abandonment precedes and possibly aggravates her fatal disease.) Indeed, for Morrison, motherhood is not necessarily biological; surrogate mothers such as Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Violet in *Jazz*, who are mothers by choice, prove to succeed well as mothers, particularly in attempting to generate in their children a sense of self and identity because they have attained it themselves.

III. CONCLUSION

Indeed, there is an evolving pattern of themes of motherhood and survival in the fiction of Toni Morrison. The development of her female characters from mere stereotypes of maternal force to self-proclaimed individuals indicates that Morrison's mother figures do not limit themselves by blindly following the ideology of black maternity and matriarchy which assumes certain qualities attached to black women, qualities which are used to justify oppression and promote submission. Women characters in Morrison's fiction seek to maintain their own identity in spite of the socially defined notions of conventional motherhood. Rather than accepting the existing assumptions about what a woman should be and trying to prove that her characters fit the standards, Morrison challenges the standards themselves. Such challenges expose the dangers of romanticizing sex-role patterns which deny women's humanity. Thus, Morrison's assertive women characters, exhibit their humanity by exercising decisiveness and self-determination. By rejecting to follow the patriarchal stereotyping of women, Morrison's characters make a strong statement against the social and economic oppression which has aimed to force them to submission since slavery and make serious attempts at recreating their own distinct individualities and destinies. Thus, what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the introduction of *The Signifying Monkey*, explicates fits Morrison's accomplishments in her novels: "My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without" (xxi).

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