

CHAPTER FOUR

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This aim of this chapter is to explore the psychological nature of absent mothering in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye* and Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*. This chapter will examine the strain relationships between a mother and her children are subjected to in view of her apathy, neglect or antipathy. All these novels offer an assessment of so called expected frames of motherhood and what happens when there is deviance or rejection of common maternal care like providing for the physical well being and emotional support of the children.

The hypotheses taken up in this chapter are

- i. that a mother's physical as well as emotional presence is necessary for a child's natural growth;
- ii. that there are reasons for someone becoming an absent mother, sometimes going back to their childhood;
- iii. that sometimes maternal absence or neglect can make a more responsible parent or mother.

Thus motherhood implies more than conception and birth. It is more about childcare and responsibility, about being both physically and emotionally present.

Absent mothering points to maternal absence, especially absence of emotional support during a child's growing stage. Maternal absence, be it emotional bonding, will be marked if the mother is not around to attend to the child's needs or is too busy or too detached to bother over children's requirements including moral and basic care and guidance. Sometimes children who have experience of maternal absence, turn out to be good parents. They decide to make up for what they lacked in their childhood and become caring and responsible mothers.

In Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Ruth Foster Dead, a mother of three children, can be seen to fit into the frame of an absent mother. Ruth is throughout present and a part of her children's lives, but living with a bullying and unloving husband for most of her married life, she has shrunken in to a shadowy presence in the Dead household. She looks after the physical needs of her children but appears to escape into a world of her own from time to time. Although she likes gardening, she trains her daughters to make artificial flowers. Her obsessive attachment to her father and after his death, to his memory, and her love for her son are seen as incestuous by her husband. However, as she explains to her grown up son, she tried to cherish the memories of genuine love and caring from her father in the face of her husband's cruelty and other people's apathy or lack of concern. Crushed by her husband's hatred, Ruth lives in marginal space where even her children fail to look upon her as an individual. They are often left with the impression that she is there and not quite there.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents the lack of empathy between Pauline Breedlove and her daughter Pecola. The mother Pauline passes on to her daughter her belief that she /they were ugly. They were also very poor, which limited their opportunities. "No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly.And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it" (34). With this kind of an attitude Pauline has no time for her daughter as she gives most of her time to the care of her employer's children. Not only does Pauline neglect her own child, she also berates and beats her up in public to show her love for the White children in her care. In Pauline's case we see dislike and disinterest for her own Black child. Her emotional absence may be seen as a kind of escape into the White world of the Fisher children, the world of her fantasies where beauty and virtue abide.

In Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* maternal neglect ensures that the child emerges as a caring mother later in life. However, absent mothering does not necessarily imply the physical absence of the mother; rather, it points to a lack of empathy between mother and child to the extent of giving the impression of maternal apathy or even ennui.

This chapter will examine the causes for absent mothering in African American women's fiction. It will also see if there was a link between some emotional trauma suffered by these mothers in the past or the not so distant past and their present inability to reach out

to their children. The study will draw upon the contentions of Jasmine Lee Cori in *The Emotionally Absent Mother* (2010). According to her, “The emotionally absent mother is not present to provide many of the functions of the Good Mother, (any adult who takes on a caring, protective role in one’s life) but perhaps most important is that her heart is not available to the child” (81). However, there are other ways in which the mother, while being there and ostensibly caring, could still offer the wrong kind of guidance or emotional support. The mother has to give the impression of solidity to the child. As Cori observes, “the most fundamental message of mirroring is ‘I see you—and you are real’” (33).

When mothers fail to send out that message they end up committing what may be seen as:

sins of omission—their failure to provide what the Good Mother provides. These sins of omission are found more often in mothers who can be described as disengaged, emotionally absent, or emotionally detached, terms that can be used interchangeably. Such mothers fail, in particular, to provide the emotional nourishment a child needs in order to develop, leaving a definite nurturing deficit. (Cori, *The Emotionally Absent Mother* 26)

These disengaged mothers, it is seen, are not deliberately or selfishly so. They find themselves in positions where they have to negotiate constant abuse, and as a rearguard action they need to develop some resilience through silence or imaginative flights or even fantasy. This leaves them less energy or emotional spark.

Cori goes on to explain that these mothers while attending to certain practical things fail to meet some of the emotional requirements of the child:

More insidious are the cases where she looks like the desirable mother, does many of the outward things that she believes constitute the central role of the mother, but is experienced by her children as not really there and not attuned.... Their focus is on making sure the children are clothed and educated and that family conflicts stay out of sight.(81)

Interestingly, some mothers do not even realize that they have failed to genuinely connect with their children. While they have been acting as care givers in the physical sense, they have not been attuned to the emotional or even intellectual needs of their

children. Consequently, the children are left with the feeling of missing out on certain things or qualities that they expected of a mother.

This feeling of lack becomes so acute at times, that children become conscious of their emotionally absent mother. Either, the mother is engaged in handling her own disturbing preoccupations, escaping into a private world of fantasy, however temporarily, or not quite capable of presenting a solid front combining shelter and succor for the child. As Cori observes, The undermothered often feel as if they don't really have a mother—although they do, which complicates the picture. The feeling is of being motherless, but the actuality is that someone is there, whom the world recognizes as one's mother.(84) It is left to the children to try and accept their parent as caring or uncaring irrespective of the signals they receive. They do not know quite how to react:

But when Mommy is distracted or worried or depressed, we don't have the same kind of support, and it's harder for us to relax and be fully present. It doesn't feel quite right to be expansive and expressive when Mommy is withdrawn or frazzled. There isn't really a place to be happy, unless we're putting on a happy face trying to cheer Mother up. Mother's happiness relieves us of these burdens, and we can simply express ourselves as we are. (57)

It follows that the children of such mothers end up with stunted personalities, or at least degrees of introversion to hide their hurt.

This kind of mother is seen in the person of Ruth in *Song of Solomon*, as mentioned earlier. Ruth had grown up only under the care of her father, a widower. She has not known a mother's love or support; hence her extreme attachment to her father. Her lack of proportion is seen in her inability to balance her love/loyalty to her husband with her love/loyalty to her father. This could be seen as the beginning of the end as her husband develops a pathological hatred towards her and even tries to turn her children against her.

The novel presents the Macon Dead household or the family setup in the following manner:

Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted

down on them like ash, dulling...their...girlish voices.... The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves. In his absence his daughters bent their necks...and his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it. (*Song of Solomon* 15)

If Macon Dead manages to both terrorize and excite his wife and children, the effect is even worse on him:

Macon...saw, like a scene on the back of a postcard, a picture of where he was headed—his own home; his wife's narrow unyielding back; his daughters, boiled dry from years of yearning; his son, to whom he could speak only if his words held some command or criticism.(30)

He refuses to take responsibility for what he had done. If his wife was unyielding, or his daughters uninspiring, or his son recalcitrant, he was not willing to accept that as his handiwork, choosing instead, to blame his wife and late father-in-law.

If Macon Dead found his family lifeless, the rest of the people found his whole establishment equally so. His Sunday trips with the family in his big car were meant to impress the people rather than an attempt at family bonding. In fact, everybody including his wife and children looked at it differently:

These rides that the family took on Sunday afternoons had become rituals and much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man. It was a less ambitious ritual for Ruth, but a way, nevertheless, for her to display her family. For the little boy it was simply a burden. Pressed in the front seat between his parents, he could see only the winged woman careening off the nose of the car. (35)

If Macon took pride in his possessions, Ruth at least took pride in her family. While the girls looked out at the men they passed, the boy found it confining as he had to kneel on the front seat and look through the back window.

As Macon Dead's Packard rolled down the Streets through the white areas as well as the black neighbourhoods, there were reactions of envy and admiration:

In 1936 there were very few among them who lived as well as Macon Dead. Others watched the family gliding by with a tiny bit of jealousy and a whole lot of amusement, for Macon's wide green Packard belied what they thought a car was for.... Other than the bright and roving eyes of Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians, the Packard had no real lived life at all. So they called it Macon Dead's hearse. (35-36)

Contrary to public opinion however, Macon Dead sets great store on worldly goods. He tells his son:

Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how. (52) '

This is a rare bit of advice he gives his son. Instead of people or family ties, he prefers his attachment to things which he feels give him power over others.

Because of his dislike for his wife, he tries to justify his hitting her by presenting her as a woman with an obscene interest in her father and son. The effect on the grown up son, Milkman, is traumatic as he completely distances himself from his mother: "His mother had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near—be it her father or her son" (72). "When his father told him about Ruth, he joined him in despising her, but he felt put upon; felt as though some burden had been given to him and that he didn't deserve it"(192). His father's disclosures trouble him and ensure that he snaps all attachment to his mother. Milkman has to contend with the fact that "His mother had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near—be it her father or her son"(72). Interestingly, the father's talk comes when Milkman is old enough to have formed an opinion of his mother by himself.

However, because of his mother's self effacement and his father's patriarchal control over the household, he allows his opinion to hold sway over everything else. In fact his father, whom he considered an imposing man, tells him: "you will do what I tell you to do. With or without explanations. As long as your feet are under my table, you'll do in this house what you are told" (47). As far as Macon Dead was concerned, Milkman had

“thought he was the biggest thing in the world. Bigger even than the house they lived in” (47). Given this kind of a situation where the father tried to rule with an iron fist without any emotional investment, it is small wonder that the son should comply without too much resistance, or that the women should be both frightened and excited in a perverse way by his behavior.

Looking back Ruth accepts that her son had not just been a son

He had always been a passion. Because she had been so desperate to lie with her husband and have another baby by him, the son she bore was first off a wished-for bond between herself and Macon, something to hold them together and reinstate their sex lives. (110)

Although Macon refuses to have any further intimacy with his wife, she continues to shower her love on her son to the extent of secretly breast feeding him when he is a toddler, and not dependent on her nursing. This attempt at a physical and emotional bonding, however, is presented as transgressive, by the janitor who happens to intrude upon them with the result that the unsuspecting child is saddled with the name Milkman all his life.

While Ruth may not be a very strong mother with a forthright attitude, her husband’s dirty conclusions about her behavior help to further estrange the ties between her and her son. As Ruth realizes much later, “he really didn’t tell her anything, and hadn’t for years. Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person”(110). This feeling appears to be mutual, the result of the husband’s jealous destructive act.

Macon’s obsession is seen in his control over his wife to the extent of not allowing her to hold her five-year old son in the car on her lap, so that he could look out of the window. Other attempts to frustrate his wife’s so-called unholy sexual urges, show him up as a control freak who wrecks the relationship between a mother and her children by suggesting that she is not only incapable of genuine maternal love, but also perverse. Under such circumstances, Ruth is compelled to express herself through her flower making art, restraining any natural overtures she might have liked to make to her children.

In his thirties Milkman finally gathers the courage to follow his mother on what turns out to be her visit to her father’s grave at night. As he waits for her by the gates of the

cemetery, he is convinced that what his father told him was true: “She was a silly, selfish, queer, faintly obscene woman. Again he felt abused. Why couldn’t anybody in his whole family just be normal”(105) ? He surprises Ruth when she comes out about an hour later and asks: “You come to lay down on your father’s grave? Is that what you’ve been doing all these years? Spending a night every now and then with your father”(105) ? Ruth takes her time replying and begins in mid-sentence:

“...because the fact is that I am a small woman. I don’t mean little; I mean small, and I’m small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings. But I didn’t think I’d ever need a friend because I had him. I was small, but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died.... [H]e cared whether and he cared how I lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did. And for that I would do anything. It was important for me to be in his presence, among his things, the things he used, had touched. Later it was just important for me to know that he was in the world. When he left it, I kept on reigniting that cared-for feeling that I got from him. But “I am not a strange woman. I am a small one. (105)

The dignity in Ruth’s answer eludes her son as he prepares to listen “to his mother with the dulled ear of someone who was about to be conned and knew it”(106). Milkman’s attitude is judgemental to say the least as if he has no idea what being small means. The loneliness of a motherless girl or her deep attachment to her father, is something he, Milkman cannot understand, as there was no such relationship with his own father. Without realizing it, he had imbibed the insensitivity of his father.

Ruth continues with her account in the face of her son’s hostility:

“I don’t know what all your father has told you about me down in that shop you all stay in. But I know, as well as I know my own name, that he told you only what was flattering to him. I know he never told you that he killed my father and that he tried to kill you. Because both of you took my attention away from him. I know he never told you that....I wouldn’t have been able to save you except for Pilate. Pilate was the one brought you here in the first place.”(105)

Only the mention of Pilate's name stirs Milkman, not his mother's quiet speech. She continues:

Pilate. Old, crazy, sweet Pilate. Your father and I hadn't had physical relations since my father died, when Lena and Corinthians were just toddlers. We had a terrible quarrel. He threatened to kill me. I threatened to go to the police about what he had done to my father. We did neither. I guess my father's money was more important to him than the satisfaction of killing me. And I would have happily died except for my babies. But he did move into another room and that's the way things stayed until I couldn't stand it anymore. Until I thought I'd really die if I had to live that way. With nobody touching me, or even looking as though they'd like to touch me. That's when I started coming to Fairfield. To talk. To talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me. Somebody I could trust. Somebody who trusted me. Somebody who was...interested in me. For my own self. I didn't care if that somebody was under the ground. You know, I was twenty years old when your father stopped sleeping in the bed with me. That's hard, Macon. Very hard. By the time I was thirty think I was just afraid I'd die that way. (106)

Interestingly, the narrative is interrupted as the scene changes to Hagar's attack on Milkman at Guitar's flat. Milkman, we realize has been going through that incident in his mind as he waits in anticipation of Hagar's attack. It is at that moment that he hears her footsteps outside Guitar's window and we are not told of what his reactions were to the starkness of his mother's explanation. But the whole thing appears to be a convenient escape route for a shallow character like Milkman who had swallowed whole, his father's bait. Ruth informs him that she started visiting her father's grave in a desperate search for sanity and comfort after living out ten youthful years as a rejected wife. From her account it appears that Macon Dead's motives were wholly mercenary as he tried to take over his wife's property without the responsibility of the wife's happiness. What most critics who pursue the incest trail in Ruth's relationships have ignored is the deep psychological insecurity in Macon Dead which leads him to deprive those gentler souls around him of their self esteem to the extent where he can strut about as a powerful rich man. What stands in the way of his complete makeover is Ruth with her knowledge and understanding of his greed and basic insecurity.

Ruth also informs her son of his birth and conception through Pilate's intervention and how his father had tried to kill him in his mother's womb:

“he told me to get rid of the baby. But I wouldn't and Pilate helped me stand him off. I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life. Andyours, Macon. She saved yours too. She watched you like you were her own. Until your father threw her out.” (106)

Even this shattering disclosure is not enough for Milkman as he prefers to question her first, about lying naked with her father's dead body, and then about continuing to nurse him beyond the normally expected stage. Ruth counters his incoherent queries with quiet dignity as she answers him, giving the lie to her husband's viciously twisted lies.

First Ruth clarifies what she had done after her father's death: “No. But I did kneel there in my slip at his bedside and kiss his beautiful fingers (107). Then when Milkman continues with his allegations she turns towards him and looking deep into his eyes, says: “And I also prayed for you. Every single night and every single day. On my knees. Now you tell me. What harm did I do you on my knees” (107)? Clearly Milkman is not interested in the truth or lacks any feeling for his mother other than the disgust which his father taught him. Remorse is not his way, nor any attempt at a deeper understanding of the woman who had withstood so much indignity for the sake of her children. As adults they see their mother as a passive, creature given to flights of fancy or even escapism, preferring artifice to the natural.

Ruth, who appears to be a kind of absent mother who is not always attuned to the needs of her grown up children, realizes in a moment of reflection that:

She had been husbanding her own misery, shaping it, making of it an art and a Way. Now she saw a larger, more malevolent world outside her own...She had thought it was all done. That she had won out over the castor oil, and the pot of team that had puckered and burned her skin so she could not bear to urinate or sit with her daughters at the table where they cut and sewed. She had had the baby anyway, and although it did nothing to close the break between herself and Macon, there he was, her single triumph. (112-13)

Ruth sees too late that she has not been able to connect with her son's mind. She had thought that overcoming the physical trauma to give birth to her son and then her

subsequent caring was enough to prove her mettle as a mother. Now she becomes conscious of the estrangement, although to what extent, is not clear. In the case of her daughters too, she has been there and not there. Right from the beginning of the novel she is seen in the company of her daughters, making velvet roses or going about the household doing odd jobs, but there is no sign of female bonding. Ruth claims that she found it hard to live without her husband's love, but she is not seen doing anything about her daughters who remain spinsters in their forties.

We learn from the elder daughter Magdalene as she scolds Milkman, for not considering anybody but himself, that she had chosen not to attend college in order to keep her mother company:

What do you know about somebody not being good enough for somebody else? And since when did you care whether Corinthians stood up or fell down? You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house....You don't know a single thing about either one of us—we made roses; that's all you knew.... (181)

She points out that the women in the household had been taken for granted—used and ordered about. Magdalene speaks for herself as well as for her mother and sister. As far as the men in the family were concerned, they might have been part of the furniture.

Magdalene elaborates further about how their lives were devoted to keeping her brother happy till he grew up to exchange his home life for the pleasures of the world outside:

Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you. You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. (182)

It is clear that the sisters as well as the mother, Ruth, contributed to looking after Milkman till he grew up. So much so, that he took things for granted and expected or received their service or care without a word of acknowledgement. Ruth and her

daughters had been reduced to passive workers, without dreams or expectations. Given such a situation when she had to live with verbal and physical abuse, there was little Ruth could do to appear positive as a mother figure. Self effacement and escapism were her only means of survival and sanity.

Magdalene points out something that Ruth does not notice, that Milkman takes after his father—not in the physical aggression—but in his selfishness and unconcern about the silent workers in the family:

“You are exactly like him. Exactly. I didn’t go to college because of him. Because I was afraid of what he might do to Mama. You think because you hit him once that we all believe you were protecting her. Taking her side. It’s a lie. You were taking over, letting us know you had the right to tell her and all of us what to do.” (182)

Again, it is Magdalene who gives voice to what went on in the family. She is not impressed by her brother’s hitting their father in protest against the latter’s abuse of their mother. Earlier illustrations from the text have shown how Milkman was willing to be persuaded by his father about his mother’s perverseness. He was happy to accept that story and not warn his father to stop using violence on his helpless wife. Instead, it was Magdalene who had given up on a career by not going away to college. Her reason as she tells her brother was to try and protect their mother from their father’s bullying. Otherwise he might have killed her. But as Ruth informs Milkman, Macon Dead was only too willing to help himself to his father-in-law’s (and by turn Ruth’s) money. This shows that if Ruth was less than forthcoming in her attitude towards her children, it was the result of her husband’s abusive control over her interaction with them. She had been ‘pressed small’ and her self esteem crushed to the extent that she was wary of reaching out to anybody but the spirit of her late father for comfort.

Magdalene’s words show that Ruth was not delusional about her husband’s abusive behaviour. Her comforting her mother when her father spoke harshly to her during that Sunday car ride shows that Macon’s misconduct was marked by his teenage daughter. Moreover, Macon was interested only in showing off to others, not in building genuine relationships within the family. As Magdalene observes:

First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon.
(182)

The bitter words reiterate one thing—that Macon Dead was a control freak, not for any good reason like protection for instance, but because of the power it gave him and because of the excitement brought on by violence. The women lived in fear of his angry displays and the awareness that they were unimportant extensions of the family. They could only shrink from such behaviour.

Thus, Ruth can be seen as an absent mother despite being present amongst her children for missing out on certain counts which according to Cori can be taken as reasons for a Mother not being there: 1) “She was a lost child herself, never bonded with her mother, and had no reference point for being an attentive, involved parent.” (2) “She was depressed and didn’t have the emotional or mental resources.” (3) “She was afraid to show her love, afraid to bond with anyone.” (4) “She didn’t know how to mother and avoided contact out of guilt and inadequacy.” (5) “She spent all her energy trying to protect herself from a raging or abusive partner.” (6) “She thought she was there, but didn’t have a clue about what was really needed” (*The Emotionally Absent Mother* 70).

Cori’s arguments can be applied to Ruth’s conduct and circumstances as seen in the illustrations from the text. Taking the first reason provided by Cori, it is seen that Ruth grew up without a mother with only her father to offer care and love. As such, she never knew a mother’s love, or the bonding with a female mother figure. Her father cared for her but he led a busy life and as Ruth informs, she was lonely and ‘pressed small’ right from her childhood. She had material goods but not the love of a mother or a mother substitute. Although the absence of a role model should not have been sufficient cause for her own ‘absence,’ as seen in the case of Pilate in the same novel, her bullying husband and her own emotional uncertainty held her back from expressing herself more positively.

Cori’s second contention that a woman might be deemed an emotionally absent mother, if she is depressed and does not have the emotional or mental resources, can be applied to Ruth as well. Ruth’s gestures or care for her children do not meet with her husband’s approval—right from her cooking to her homemaking. His abusive behaviour shakes her confidence in herself to the extent where she finds relief in temporary escapes into the

world of myth and the folk imagination. Moreover, Ruth suffers because of her father's illness and subsequent death. We learn from the narrative that Ruth had tried her utmost to keep her father alive, almost defying death, and she labours under a feeling that she might have tried to keep him alive against his own wishes. These two factors—the loss of her father to whom she was deeply attached and her husband's increasing hostility—may be seen as decisive in draining her of her emotional and mental resources as she continued to withstand all pressures for the sake of her children.

The third reason cited by Cori for which a mother might appear emotionally absent is if she happens to be afraid of showing her love or bonding with anybody. This is again seen in Ruth's case. Her clumsy attempts at an elemental bonding are seen as incestuous or at best crazy. Each time someone called her son Milkman, Ruth would feel both ashamed and guilty. Her husband did not allow her to get close to her children because of his pet theory that she was an abnormal person. Consequently Ruth had the option of self effacement or escape to an imaginary world where she could figure out her ties in mythical terms.

Cori's fourth reason follows from the third and can be readily applied to Ruth. Cori contends that some mothers "didn't know how to mother and avoided contact out of guilt and inadequacy," appears to fit in with Ruth's dilemma (70). She finds that her attempts to reach out to people are not well received and even misconstrued by some people. What she sees as natural is seen askance by others, with the result that she is either confused, ignored, snubbed, or suppressed. She can only move through her children's lives as a shadowy character, uncertain of their response with the one certainty being her husband's unrelenting hostility towards herself.

Cori's fifth reason that a woman missed out on positive motherhood by spending "all her energy trying to protect herself from a raging or abusive partner," was only too true in Ruth's case. She had had to live with so much hostility for so long that she finally found it mildly exciting to counter that through her own lifestyle. If having to live with verbal and physical abuse was debilitating at times, Ruth looked for escape by visiting her father's grave in another place late at night. In fact her son thinks it bizarre and sordid and jumps to the conclusion that his mother was lying on her father's grave at night. However, Ruth's simple reply that she visited her father's grave for emotional relief, shows that for her it was a perfectly legitimate purpose. Since she spent most of the day

in the house working, she felt that once in a while she could reach out to the spirit of her dead father. That is not to say that Ruth was not concerned about her children, especially her son who had grown up to be a stranger. When she hears that his cousin Hagar keeps trying to kill him she goes out to accost her. But it needs a life and death situation to draw Ruth out of her torpor.

Cori's sixth reason that despite being there the mother did not have a clue about what to do also fits in with Ruth's character. When Ruth goes out to challenge Hagar for stalking Milkman with the intent of killing him, they end up quarreling about their prized 'possession' Milkman. It takes Pilate to introduce some sense into their exchange. Ruth is almost always around but is uncertain of what to do. Consequently, her gestures or actions are unclear, if not downright confusing to her children.

Unlike *Song of Solomon*, in *Maud Martha* the neglected child decides when she gets the opportunity, to become a good mother. While Maud Martha had been conscious of being overlooked in favour of her elder sister Helen by her mother, she ensures that she offers her daughter proper care and affection. Interestingly, Maud Martha grows as a person in her efforts to be a good mother to her daughter.

Maud Martha is not favoured by her family and outsiders because of her darker skin colour. There is a colour consciousness which aims at discrimination among blacks and whites as well as among the blacks themselves. Little boys prefer Helen's company as do her parents and brother, despite Maud Martha being more practical and helpful. Thus Maud Martha suffers from her family's, especially, her mother's neglect. Indifference is all Mrs. Brown can offer her younger daughter. Even her brother who was closer to her in that she helped him out at times, extends his courtesy towards Helen.

In their preference for Helen over Maud Martha, their parents show a colour bias which is reflected in others. Maud Martha observes: "It's funny how some people are just charming, just pretty, and others, born of the same parents, are just not." As if to make up for her indifference, Mrs. Brown praises her contribution in the kitchen: "You've always been wonderful...I always say you make the best cocoa in the family," Maud Martha feels patronized or as if it was some task that was being praised and not her

person. It may be noted that it is hard for a child to understand discrimination within the family circle, especially when the parents are her own.

The envy and jealousy are not unnatural as it is part of the normal sibling rivalry to win the affections of the parents. That is why she finds it hard to identify their weakness or just preference for her prettier sister:

Their father preferred Helen's hair to Maud Martha...which impressed him, not with its length and body, but simply with its apparent untamableness; for he would never get over that zeal of his for order in all things....(37)

Her father appears to go against his usual preference for order in loving Helen's unruly hair. She feels let down by their lack of interest in her as a person. They take her loyalty for granted but never show their appreciation for her presence.

Despite the neglect suffered during her growing years, Maud Martha ends up as a normal, loving and caring person, especially as a mother. During childbirth she emerges as the elemental mother as she starts asserting herself amidst all the pain. She even warns her mother against hysteria if she wanted to attend to her. "I'm having enough trouble without you making a fuss over everything" (95). Maud experiences her a kind of liberation as she finds her voice to exclaim to the neighbours: "Did you hear the news? I just had a baby, and I feel strong enough to go out and shovel coal! Having a baby is nothing....Nothing at all" (98). Maud Martha is exultant after the birth and ready to take on the joys and cares of motherhood. She appears to prove Collins' claim that "Mothering is an empowering experience for many African-American women"(111). She observes that Maud Martha's child "serves as a catalyst for her movement into self-definition, self valuation, and individual empowerment.

Maud Martha's mother blames her for marrying a person who could not even provide a good house. However, Maud Martha replies with "I have a lot of things. I have more than she has. I have a husband, a nice little girl, and a clean home of my own" (167). If it was possessions they were talking about what was wrong with counting your dear ones? Maud Martha discovers the confidence to assert herself to protect her own family and

turf. She even finds enough affection in herself to comfort her mother over her domestic worries:

It has not been a hard cold world for you, Mama. You've been very lucky. You've had a faithful, homecoming husband, who bought you a house, not the best house in town, but a house. You have, most of the time, plenty to eat, you have enough clothes so that you can always be clean. And you're strong as a horse. (169)

These words show a kind and considerate person. In the process of loving her child Maud Martha finds that she can reach out to her indifferent family members.

Maud Martha overcomes her childhood neglect by protecting her daughter from the indifference of her husband with a fierce love. She knows that she should guard her child against such hurt and goes all out to take the Santa at a department store to task for ignoring her little daughter. She is aware that the slight is deliberately racist and the new woman in her is ready to take on the world for her child's sake. She calls out

“Mister, my little girl is talking to you”

Santa Claus's neck turned with hard slowness, carrying his unwilling face with it. “Mister” said Maud Martha. “And what-do you want for Christmas.” No question mark at the end. (73)

Maud Martha is genuinely concerned that a grown up person on a goodwill mission could misbehave with a child only because she happens to be black. Unfortunately her daughter notices his treatment and asks her mother:

“Why didn't Santa Claus like me?...He liked other children. He smiled at them and shook their hands.” (174)

Her mother can only bluster:

“Listen child. People don't have to kiss you to show they like you....Santa Claus loves every child....(175)

Maud Martha knows that exposing her child to racism or even making her aware of it could have a traumatic effect on her mind and does her best to keep her in ignorance for some more time.

After she became a mother she began to find her own inner strength. As for example we can refer to the incident of Maud Martha's new housekeeping job, which she has taken in order to augment the family income and provide more fully for her daughter. From the moment she enters the house, she is obsessed with the dominant racist attitude of Mrs. Burns-Cooper. By the end of the day, Maud Martha has decided to leave her job. Though directly she cannot protest against Mrs. Cooper's racist remarks this time, she at least questions the appropriateness of her silence and construct in her head, an argument she should have made. She, for the first time can comprehend her husband Paul's situation working under his Boss. She feels an intimacy with Paul when elder Burns-Cooper complains against her cooking as evident from her reflections:

As his boss looked at Paul, so these people looked at her. As though she were a child, a ridiculous one, and one that ought to be given a little shaking, except that shaking was—not quite the thing, would not quite do.(162)

After that first, humiliating day, she decides not to return again. Her silent rebellion leaves her with a sense of incompleteness. This defiant behavior, so different from her generally compliant nature, is a mystery even to Maud Martha. Her oblique reference to Paulette in her internal arguments to Mrs. Burns-Cooper, however, suggests that, at least on a subconscious level, she is beginning to derive a more resolute sense of being and a new inner strength in direct connection with her maternal self:

Why, one was a human being. One wore clean nightgowns. One loved one's baby. One drank cocoa by the fire—or the gas range—comes the evening, in the wintertime. (163)

This shows how Maud Martha is gradually evolving from her earlier submissiveness to boldness. She can at least make a silent protest against the superior and boastful attitude of Mrs. Burns-Cooper and family.

Though the novel does not explain in detail about the maternal issues as Maud Martha does not even become a mother before two thirds of the novel, maternity still emerges as a crucial factor in the novel. An ordinary woman, perhaps, she develops remarkable inner strength through the power of intense motivation – the welfare of her child. “What she wanted was to donate to the world a good Maud Martha. That was the offering, the bit of art that could not come from any other.” (22). Maud Martha thus very consciously and skillfully develops her inner self through her daughter Paulette. The inner strength she develops is the direct consequence of her newly achieved power through motherhood.

At novel’s end, an exuberant Maud Martha poses to the sky one final question: “What, what, am I to do with all of this life?” Particularly in view of the crucial part that motherhood has played in her revitalization, her question seems an awe-filled response to her second pregnancy:

And what exactly was one to do with it all? At a moment like this one was ready for anything, was not afraid of anything....At a moment like this one could think even of death with a sharp exhilaration, feel that death was a part of life: that life was good too. (178)

With this sense of readiness she is willing to accept anything in her stride. For her there was life ahead despite the dark incidents like lynching that one read of in newspapers.

With this approach to life and being, Maud Martha prepares to face child bearing once again. Her question about what to do—indicates more than the life growing inside: it is also about the life growing inside her, the psychological blossoming that she is experiencing. The woman who found a voice on behalf of her daughter at Christmas time looks forward to the future in spring. This Maud Martha reflects a new resilience. While she had earlier sought solid, permanent, predictable things, she is now confident about a future that that she cannot possibly predict, unworried about what it holds.

Maud Martha’s internal musings are fundamentally different here. Her earlier imagining reveals an escapist attitude, a posture of isolation, distancing her from other people. These final thoughts put her in contact with the world, suggesting the emergence of a

more assured more socially connected, more articulate Maud Martha. That she continues to represent herself as that “commonest flower”, the quirky, resilient dandelion, confirms that her sense of self remain firmly grounded. She is brimming with confidence in the wake of her pregnancy, and the dandelion metaphor communicates a new resolve: Even if she stumbles, she will reemerge intact in the spring.

And this uniqueness grows into its full stature, only when she comes into contact with her child. The gradual emergence from despair to determination, bewilderment to self assurance comes along with her process of upbringing of her daughter. In this way, the concept of absent mothering is challenged by the mother figure in Maud Martha; who constantly and consciously keeps her child from the negative mirroring that she herself experienced during her childhood

Pauline Breedlove in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* may be seen as another example of an emotionally absent mother. She is so caught up with the white concept of beauty that she convinces herself and her daughter Pecola that they are ugly. The author describes the Breedloves as poor and black and convinced that they were ugly. This idea of beauty drives a wedge between mother and child as Pauline appears to swallow the white racist perception of blacks as sub human. When Pecola accidentally spills a pan of blueberry cobbler, her mother’s reaction is vicious:

the pan tilted under Pecola’s fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. (*The Bluest Eye* 99)

Despite the mess created in the kitchen, any mother would have noted Pecola’s burnt legs. But not Mrs. Breedlove. Instead of attending to her burns, she was intent on further hurting her daughter. The total lack of empathy is visible in her priorities as utters: “my floor, mess...look what you...work...get on out...now that...crazy...my floor, my

floor...my floor” (99). Her daughter’s injury is unimportant, but her floor is definitely important to her.

The incident also exposes Pauline’s bias towards her white charges. She is all sweetness as she tends to the young white girl while she beats her daughter who is injured because blacks have no place in her scheme of things. No doubt Pecola’s curiosity fostered by her friends’ interest had caused that accident to the blueberry pie, but whether it deserved that severe a punishment was totally out of Pauline’s apprehension. Moreover, when the young girl of the house asks “Who were they, Polly?” Pauline simply hushes her with the reply: “Don’t worry none, baby” (100). She was obviously not going to acknowledge her daughter or her friends. As far as she was concerned they did not matter.

Pauline’s behavior towards her daughter appears to have a history of its own. While Pauline cannot be absolved of her treatment of Pecola, her own childhood was peculiar too:

Although she was the ninth of eleven children and lived on a ridge of red Alabama clay seven miles from the nearest road, the complete indifference with which a rusty nail was met when it punched clear through her foot during her second year of life saved Pauline Williams from total anonymity. The wound left her with a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked—not a limp that would have eventually twisted her spine, but a way of lifting the bad foot as though she were extracting it from little whirlpools that threatened to pull it under. (101)

Pauline grew up amidst indifference. There were too many of them and nobody gave her extra attention, even when she had that serious injury in her foot. There were no nicknames for her, no jokes, no mention of her likes and dislikes.

In fact, she convinces herself that it was all because of her injury which left her with a heavy foot:

Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot. Restricted, as a child, to this cocoon of her family’s spinning, she cultivated quiet and private pleasures. She liked, most of all, to arrange things. To line things up

in rows—jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stones, leaves—and the members of her family let these arrangements be. (101-2)

This shows that Pauline was separated from the rest of her siblings by her injury which demanded a more quiet life. That itself stopped her from bonding with the others. Apart from that Pauline liked everything in order, seen in her early arrangement of things. This could be one reason why she gets so angry when Pecola drops the pie spilling cooked blueberries on the floor. That, however, is no excuse for beating her daughter instead of attending to her burns. She blames her daughter for the misfortunes that befall her.

We learn that Pauline was not always like that. But when her husband continued his drinking she had to take more responsibility:

She took on the full responsibility and recognition of breadwinner and returned to church. First, however, she moved out of the two rooms into a spacious first floor of a building that had been built as a store. She came into her own with the women who had despised her, by being more moral than they.... Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross.(115)

Pauline toughens up over the years as discovers new things in herself : “she developed a hatred for things that mystified or obstructed her; acquired virtues that were easy to maintain; assigned herself a role in the scheme of things; and harked back to simpler times for gratification” (114). She gave up on the movies and the clothes as she worked at a job full time.

She finds a job with a well-to-do white family which is kind and appreciative. Gradually Pauline develops a love of all the beautiful things that fill up the house, the soft carpets and fluffy curtains, the pretty dishes and beautiful objects. The more she liked the house of her employers, the more she started disliking her own:

Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and

late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. (115)

Pauline is gratified to hear the appreciation of the family regarding her work. “We’ll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will not leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant”(116). She is happy to be given a nickname and resolves to keep things in order.

Even as she enjoyed her work, Pauline kept her home and her work separate. It was her ideal world not to be shared by those who did not belong:

Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Then she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life. (116)

With her love for order she thinks that she can control both worlds: her home and her workplace. What she thinks is religion and responsibility is only imposed discipline without any understanding of human needs. She considers fear her weapon with the arrogance of the bread earner, forgetting that children need love and understanding, not to say, caring, to grow up.

As she herself admits she teaches her daughter fear of life but has no idea how that might help her from anticipating assaults by drunken rapists. She considers her old days and her softer ways a part of her idle dreams, to be avoided at all costs:

She was an active church woman, did not drink, smoke, or carouse, defended herself mightily against Cholly, rose above him in every way, and felt she was fulfilling a mother’s role conscientiously when she pointed out their father’s

faults to keep them from having them, or punished them when they showed any slovenliness, no matter how slight, when she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them.(116)

Pauline even holds Pecola responsible for the brutal rape by her father. This is made clear to us through her conversation with an imaginary friend:

Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove? I did tell her! I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch. I wasn't sleeping! I was reading! You don't have to shout. You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her. So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time? She wouldn't have believed me then either. (155)

Pauline is not willing to recognize the truth even when it stares in her face. Going out to work she had become a different person who hoped to control things by fear and violence. Not only did she not have time to care for her family, she had also reneged on her role as wife and mother. She does not acknowledge her daughter, nor does she wish to spare any time worrying about her. As she admits, her family had become an encumbrance for her.

The concept of absent mothering, thus, can be analyzed from the perspective of positive mirroring as well as its opposite. No amount of parental care can entirely protect African American children from negative societal mirroring and behavior. Often parental care within an oppressed community tends to be deficient to some extent precisely because of societal damage inflicted earlier upon the parents, resulting in reduced sense of self.

Thus we cannot ignore the impact of socio--political factors behind creating absent mothers. It is up to the individuals, how they resist that effect. Mothers like Ruth Foster Dead provide negative mirroring to their children, while mothers like Maud Martha endorse in a stronger way the universal notion regarding motherhood and maternity. Pauline thinks commitment to work demands rejection of family concerns.

Thus the cases of motherhood help to show how emotionally absent mothers carry the burden of their own pasts. Whether it is the preoccupation of parents with race, class and

gender, and the inability of the mothers to provide good enough mothering at the developmental stages of the infant's life or the childhood hurt of the mother which makes good enough mothering impossible for them, absent mothers are still found in some African American families. But like Maud Martha, an emotionally deprived childhood does not necessarily lead to a repressed adult, a mother to be specific. On the other hand, there is no way a mother can compartmentalize things, or expect to offer genuine care by remote control or fear psychosis.

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