

CONCLUSION

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The role of a mother though universal as far as child bearing is concerned, entails a lot of difference as far as rearing of children is concerned. Mothers' roles are often determined by culture and tradition apart from social circumstances. In African American communities mothering is shared by relatives and other people within the community. This study of mother figures in African American women's fiction shows that some mother assume complicated mothering roles or are so busy earning a living to support the family that a lot functions connected with maternal care are left to others or other mothers.

African American motherhood has a history of abuse as slave women were often forced to kill the children born to them out of rape or abuse by white men, including the slave master. Sometimes these women themselves chose violent ends for their children. Thus most of these writers have addressed the trauma attaché to motherhood under slavery. Again slave children were often treated as the property of the master to be sold off as soon as they could do some work. Human feelings or any bond between mother and child was not considered.

In post slavery America or during the period of Reconstruction, racial discrimination continued with African Americans serving their white masters. During slavery the women looked after the white master's children and even nursed them, depriving their own children of their milk. African American women had to balance looking after the employer's children and taking care of their own. They face problems as they try to adapt or assimilate with the social expectations of the dominant white group. Sometimes they are pushed to moving away from normative gender roles. Factors like race, gender and class play a decisive role in shaping the maternal identity of an African American woman. While mothering is shared by others, this dissertation has examined some mothers who deviate from the norm or renege on their responsibilities, giving way to the identification of other mothers, absent mothers, mixed race mothers and mothers whose maternity shows ruptures.

Chapter 2, titled “Maternity Under Rupture” shows how ruptures can occur in the mothering process through social and economic as well as personal or psychological factors. In *Beloved* and *Sula* the intensity of maternal love is often expressed through violence: a slave mother’s killing of her own daughter or Eva’s killing of her son. Sethe’s act shows how slavery pushes its victims to lose their sanity or sense of being, temporarily or permanently. Eva’s ruptured maternity on the other hand is influenced by the post world war scenario. In its aftermath it was difficult for ordinary but normal people to pick up the pieces of their life. Given the strained circumstances, Eva sees no way to avert her son’s death wish through drugs. So she ensures that her beloved son can have his death wish through the ‘accident’ that she arranges. In both novels the mothers, Sethe and Eva, act in what they believe to be good faith. If they are misguided, they are certainly not mad or criminally inclined. In both cases it is to save their children from greater pain that the two mothers do the unthinkable—kill them. While this shows a rupture of the bonds of motherhood, it also points to extenuating circumstances.

Unlike them Olivia’s case is without any defense: pushing a son to his death by her aversion to his colour simply because he stands in the way of her ambitions. Despite the background of racism in America at that time, and the rejection of people with mixed blood, Olivia’s attempts to escape her racial heritage and her ruptured maternity unleashes untold tragedies for her husband and children. Olivia’s obsession with race and so called racial superiority is the deciding factor in the periodical ruptures in her maternity. Loving, caring and nurturing play no part in her brittle life which, depended on a round of parties with white people for sustenance. This fascination for whiteness is not uncommon in non white communities but nowhere so obsessive that parents have to reject their children or a mother should disavow her bond with her own son. While Olivia does not indulge in physical violence like Sethe and Eva, the ruptured maternity that she presents, can be taken as more horrid and inhuman than the gruesome ruptures presented by the other two women.

Chapter 3 titled, “Re-examining ‘Other Mothering’ ” shows different kinds of othermothers from the times of slavery to contemporary times. While it is often the resilience of a community that provides othermothers, sometimes women are catapulted into situations where they find themselves caring for a child or children, without the

tradition in the background. Some of these othermothers are simple women extending care to someone in need like Nanny and Janie or Lina and Florens, at others they may be as colourful as Lindy.

Othermothers have the ability to perform the roles of parental nurturer and life-supporter, in addition to or in the emulation of the biological mothering. Sometimes their role is more effective than the real mothers, who remain physically present but emotionally absent. This holds true for the other mothers in the texts under discussion. These mothers can comprehend motherhood going beyond the boundaries of self and other. They recreate themselves into de-stereotyped mothers who can do their unconditional mothering regardless of the strain of society and its imposed circumstances.

Other mothering does not operate by default. Rather, they consolidate or step into the gap left by the biological mother's unavailability. Pilate and Ruth are not in a tensional relationship: Pilate consolidates the gaps left by Ruth. Similarly, Janie's grandmother tries to fill in all the possible gaps left by her absent daughter. So does Lina fill in for *mina mae*. Each case shows that other mothers are selfless creatures giving all they can for the physical and emotional care of the child till it reaches maturity.

Chapter 4, titled "Absent Mothering and its Contradictions" shows that absent mothering is a part of African American families, especially the lower class people where the mother has to go out to work. In such people physical absence is tied with emotional absence: the mother has too much to do and little time for her children. Pauline Breedlove's absent mothering in *The Bluest Eye* could be connected with her work as she is enchanted by that world and hates her husband and children for being reality checks in her fantasy ride. Ruth Dead is the typical emotionally absent mother in the sense that she takes care of her children, is kind and considerate but somehow inept and vacuous in her responses to certain crucial issues. 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.

In *Maud Martha* we see a neglected child growing up to emerge as a strong and resilient mother. Maud Martha decides to make up for her mother's emotional absence during her childhood—because she was not pretty like her sister—and to ensure that her daughter does not lose out on maternal love and support. 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 bond with their children or the childhood hurt of the mother which makes good 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 mother. On the other hand, there is no way a mother can compartmentalize things, or expect to offer genuine care by remote control or by making the children fear maternal displeasure.

Chapter 5, titled “Interraciality and Motherhood” explores the predicament of the mothers of mixed race identity and the resultant trauma in their children. Torn in between races, it is quite problematic for such mothers to overcome the dilemma resulting from racial anxiety, physical and mental abuse of being either a black or a white mother. Mothers as well as daughters in an interracial situation frequently undergo mental trauma as they try to fit themselves into both white and black societies. Ultimately the demands made on their persons and their time, lead to an erosion of maternal care in some form or the other, resulting in disillusionment and exhaustion.

Helga finds her biracial identity troublesome as she is happy neither in the white world nor completely satisfied with the world of African Americans. *Quicksand* portrays the frustration and alienation of the biracial subject who feels an intense conflict between the personal and the political—a conflict between biracial consciousness and a social identity generated by the systems of hegemonic power which enforce divisions between black and white Americans.

Sappho, In Brooks's *Contending Forces*, on the other hand, because of her own self determination and strength of her character, rises above the limitations put forward by society as a mixed race woman. Though her initial hesitation is natural as far as her single status and physical and mental tortures are concerned, she none the less falls prey to the situation like Helga. Helga's restless does not allow her to find peace and contentment in an interracial world. In both the cases maternity was neither deliberate nor welcomed. While Helga at least has a family recognition as a wife, Sappho is devoid of that recognition. Still mother love proves triumphant over her harsh racial situation and allows her to unite with her son, Alphonse. Helga, on the contrary, tries to escape from the realities of life by thinking of imaginary suicide, both physically and emotionally overcome by the burden of child rearing.

Clare's death brings to focus the tensions which people engaged in passing have to overcome. Irene expresses her fears on Clare's behalf but Clare who lives the double life putting everything in jeopardy, has her own fears to overcome. It was either a case of allowing herself to be subsumed in the white community as she had done for more than a decade, or finding her individuality through renewed contacts with the world of Harlem. Given the narrowness of social perception and discrimination, people of mixed races can find comfortable footholds in neither the white world or the black world although the latter is more accommodating to the biracial. Compared to Irene who prefers a steady and more predictable life, Clare lives and dies, dangerously.

While all the women—Sappho, Helga, Clare and Irene—are forced to address issues of race amidst the risks of passing, Olivia's predicament though brought on by the social conditions, is more self nourished as she lives with it throughout her life. Against the advice of first her mother, then her husband and children, Olivia continues to feed her obsession for whiteness as she looks for acceptance in white society. Nothing or nobody is allowed to come in the way of her ambitions—not her parents, husband, children or their intended spouses. Even the shocking suicide of her young son, which is so traumatic to the rest of her family, does not stop her in her tracks. Even rude eviction by her white son-in-law from his residence, does not help to open her eyes to the reality around her. She lives with her delusions.

Thus this dissertation shows that in African American communities motherhood cannot be taken for granted as a simple matter of birth and bringing up a child. The women are forced into situations where children are pushed to the periphery of their existence, or banished or killed as a defensive measure. The social situations these mothers find themselves in, ultimately pushes them into less than natural maternal positions. Thus African American motherhood cannot be judged on the basis of set standards of American society due to their racial, social and historical positions. As such, mothering roles vary, depending upon a particular situation of a given moment. The abundance of different types of motherhood in a way signals the fluid and overlapping boundaries of African American society, where mothering responsibilities are viewed from a totally different perspective insofar as the universality of motherhood is concerned.

The image of the mother in African American fiction is refracted not only slavery and colonialism but also through issues of livelihood, gender, and power. It also cuts across powerful tropes available in male mythologies, both white and black. Slavery turns usual stories of motherhood and maternity on their heads by hollowing out the hypocritical ideals that prop up the mother as giver and goddess. It repeatedly shows how ideal mothers are created more by social conventions than biological facts or requirements. What is important is the critical negotiations women have to make first to survive, and then survive as mothers or wives.

In the novels discussed in the thesis women challenge and interrogate traditional trappings of maternity. Most African American women novelists create contexts where it is not the mother alone who is responsible for rejecting the codes of motherhood. First of all, it is slavery that transforms black women into commodities as well as sex objects. In the middle of such degradation, women mutate into new women and create a sceptre of motherhood that challenges models on offer. Clearly, any such challenge affects the child—for the child is neglected or abandoned, often in life-threatening situations, or left in the care of others—changing the course of the child's life.

Interestingly, however, the black mother's interrogation of motherhood has skewed results. The child abandoned by the mother, either physically or emotionally, turns out to be an incomplete or deranged individual. He or she then turns to crime, corruption, anti-social ways. When the abandoned child is left to his/her devices, the child finds ways of self-discovery that do not match any predictable course or pattern. In some other cases, the child is not exactly left in the wilderness. The mother, away or absent from the scene of the child's growing, plays an extremely defining role, booth enabling

and disabling. There are children who are picked up by women who are strangers, relations, neighbours or even friends of parents and give the child a new life. While the pattern of such other mothering varies, the larger issue that comes to the fore is the peculiar resilience of a community—especially of women—to tend and care for the young. This reflects on the role played by slavery in disintegrating the very frames on which motherhood stands. But the black woman and her sisters give the ‘orphaned’ child a new lease of life, often teaching the abandoned or rejected child the worth of life itself, the importance of toughness and perseverance and the power of humanity. There are cases where such othermothering handicaps a child, but the larger role in that case is attributed to the long shadow of slavery and slave trade. When slavery creates in its wake mixed-race mothers, existing social mores can no longer support the emerging structure and structures of feeling. These mothers defy patriarchal definitions of motherhood to give their children a new kind of insight into a future that is not easily comprehended.

One returns to the power and tenacity of the black woman to see motherhood reinvent itself and push maternity to extreme limits. African American women novelists—Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker—offer unsettling pictures of motherhood that defy given patterns but create possible lives for a new world and challenge the obsolete patterns of the old, dominated by patriarchy and racism. These mothers often kill and maim and destroy, but not wilfully. They are enabling and creative, suggesting that they give a new impetus to an imperilled community. They form a community of black women.

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