

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an attempt to study the mother figures in the novels by African American Women writers. It presents how the mother figures in the chosen texts interrogate maternity from different perspectives. It also looks into the ways how these mother figures deviate from the set rules of an ideal, traditional motherhood defined by the dominant culture. As seen from the representations of the mother figures in this dissertation, many factors are responsible for their departures from normal motherhood. Apart from the historical, social and racial factors, sometimes a mother's personal ideology or obsession also forces them to behave in a less than ordinary way.

The methodology applied in this dissertation is an eclectic one which combines Feminist, Psychological, Sociological theories of motherhood alongside racial complications.

Apart from highlighting the contradictions of the slave mother, this dissertation also focuses on the complexities and dilemmas of mixed race mothers. Not only do they face the problem of acute colour consciousness, they also have to negotiate the problem of passing by themselves or by their children. Mother figures as depicted in the novels by African American women writers are pushed into complex and troubling roles under the pressure of circumstances. We find examples of mothers committing infanticide in the name of protection. In that way they present a departure from normal motherhood.

This dissertation studies the mother figures in African American fiction by dividing it into four categories, depending upon the roles played by the mother figures in providing proper care and nurturance to their children in the chosen texts. These categories are—mothers whose maternity is ruptured, other mothers, absent mothers and interracial mothers.

The first category consists of mothers like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Eva Peace in *Sula* and Olivia in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy American Style*. In *Beloved* and *Sula*, maternity is ruptured under the pressure of historical and socio political factors like slavery and post-world war situation. When we observe the bizarre socio-political condition of the time, we can justify their distractions, departures from the mother line.

But in case of Olivia Cary, her obsession with race and so called racial superiority is the deciding factor in the ruptures in her maternity.

The second category comprises othermothers like Nanny in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Lina in Morrison's *A Mercy* and Lindy, in *Singing in the Comeback Choir* by Bebe Moore Campbell. Through the depiction of these othermothers an attempt is made to evaluate their roles in the upbringing of the children whom they have chosen to assume responsibility. This chapter also shows the different kinds of women who may act as othermothers.

The third category, absent mothering, pertains to the emotionally absent mothers who remain physically present but emotionally absent. Mother figures presented in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, Ruth in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* can be studied from this perspective. This dissertation shows how absent mothering critiques the universal notion of motherhood and maternity, highlighting both its positive and negative effect.

The fourth and the last category includes mothers of mixed race heritage and complications they face in society. Torn as they are, in in-between spaces, it is quite problematic for such mothers to display the motherly qualities all the time. As a result, the maternal bond between a mother and child is strained, to say the least. The dilemma of mother figures Karen and Helga in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Irene and Clare in *Passing*, Sappho in Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* and Janet and Olivia in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy: American Style* have been studied in this chapter .

Thus through the representations of different types of motherhood this dissertation tries to draw attention to the fluid boundaries of African American motherhood. A number of these categories are seen to overlap as shades of rupture are found in emotionally absent mothers or biracial mothers.