

INTRODUCTION

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It is seen that African American women's fiction interrogates the so called ideal types or stereotypes as far as representation of mothers and motherhood is concerned. Writers like Toni Morrison, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Bebe Moore Campbell, etc. by creating complicated female characters with individual thoughts, emotions and maternal instincts; deconstruct the stereotypical image of motherhood and maternity. Through their fictional works, these writers indicate that African American mothers do not follow uniform definitions and set boundaries as the meaning of motherhood and maternity have been defined differently for such mothers. Even in normal circumstances, motherhood, for African American women is one of constant pressure. African American women cannot escape the burden of workforce associated with them by birth, working both in the white master's household and acting as the lone provider in their own family. This dissertation makes a critical analysis of the mother figures presented in the novels under scrutiny, who in their own varying ways, interrogate maternity within historical, racial and socio-political contexts and are, thereby, categorized through commonalities and differences.

It follows that this dissertation engages with figures of maternity which may be seen as departures from the conventional models of motherhood. They are either other mothers, absent mothers, mothers whose maternity is ruptured, or mixed race mothers who are so disadvantaged or colour conscious that their maternity is put under severe strain, even challenged.

Objectives: This dissertation seeks

- i. to examine the paradoxical nature of maternal love in select African American women's fiction;
- ii. to explain how 'absent' mothering challenges the conventions and understanding of maternity;
- iii. to critically examine the role of the non-biological or "other mothers" in the upbringing of the child;
- iv. to explore the dilemma of a mother in inter-racial situations and

- v. to examine departures and deviations against socially constructed norms of motherhood.

Hypotheses: This project addresses the following hypotheses:

- a. that the African-American women writers dismantle the mothering stereotype within their historical, racial and textual dynamics by challenging set ideals;
- b. that the representation of motherhood cannot be isolated from the politics of inclusion, exclusion and expectation;
- c. that absent mothering and other mothering critique the universal concepts regarding motherhood and maternity.
- d. that mulatta mothers are pushed into situations where they are forced to either distance themselves or adopt a less than regular role as mother.

The novels chosen for the proposed study are Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*(1933), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987), *A Mercy* (2008) and Bebe Moore Campbell's *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (1998)

Review of literature:

The corpus under review can be divided into three categories;

- (a) Works on theories of motherhood : Simone de Beavouir (1949), John Bowlby(1953), Adrienne Rich (1976), Patricia Hill Collins(1987), bell hooks(1990), Andrea O' Reilly(2004).
- (b) Works on African American women's fiction: Hortense Spillers, Venetria Patton, Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby.
- (c) Works on motherhood in African American Women's Fiction: Sachi Nakchi(2001), Elaine Tuttle Hansen (1997),Virginia Blanton Broaddles (2002), Licia Morrow Calloway(2003),Obioma Nnaemeka(2005), Rebecca Hope Ferguson(2007), Andrea O' Reilly , Gloria Thomas Pillow(2010).

Although issues pertaining to motherhood have been examined in various studies, those of ruptured, mixed race and absent mothering in African American Women's fiction have not been central to or part of a single work.

Methodologies/approach (es) applied

This dissertation will draw from the Feminist, psychological, sociological theories of motherhood alongside racial complications.

Chapter Plan

Apart from the Introduction and the Conclusion, the dissertation has five chapters.

Chapter 1, titled "Interrogating Maternity in African American Women's Fiction" deals with the critical tools or frames for analysis of various texts. Of theoretical writings, those from feminist, psychoanalytic and sociological theories on motherhood help to examine the representation of mothers in African American literature. This dissertation mainly draws from African American theories of motherhood highlighting Andrea O'Reilly, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins's ideas on motherhood and maternity. O'Reilly is helpful in the analysis of "maternal ruptures"(Reilly 73) in connection with historical and socio-political context. Adrienne Rich's ideas on the maternal bond connecting "two biologically alike bodies" (Rich 225) is helpful in discussing the mother-daughter relationship. bell hooks' ideas on motherhood as "a form of resistant power" (*Yearning* 41) against white, heterosexual, middle-class values and Collins' arguments on African American community's practice of "other mothering"—"women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins184) are useful in examining the roles played by "other mothers" in African American society. In order to understand the idiosyncrasies of the "absent mother", Jasmine Lee Corrie's *The Emotionally Absent Mother* is used to examine the different types of absence in the mothers discussed.

Chapter 2, titled "Maternity Under Rupture" discusses how the African American the continuation of the traditional norms of motherhood is undermined or challenged by historical as well as personal factors. The chapter examines how Sethe in *Beloved* has to undergo psychic trauma in an attempt to protect her daughter from a dark and gloomy future. Her ruptured maternity consequently results in a broken relationship

with her sons and daughter, Denver. This chapter focuses on the emotional as well as relationship ruptures undermining the maternal bond, with a reading of *Sula* and *Beloved*. This chapter argues that in order to understand Morrison's depictions of motherhood, there is the need to analyze the severity of slavery and other extenuating circumstances like the World War trauma and the failures and disillusionment which reduce people to mere shadows or apologies of manhood. This chapter also examines the complexities of motherhood in interracial situations, given the background of racism in early twentieth century America. It shows how it is not just society but individual obsessions with colour and whiteness which can ruin lives as in the case of Olivia in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*. If the first two novels show maternal ruptures under pressure, the last novel shows how personal obsessions with colour and race could lead to ruptured maternity.

Chapter 3, titled, "Re-examining 'Other Mothering' " shows how other mothers step in to take care of children whose own mothers have either died, abandoned their children for some reason, or are simply not capable of meeting their needs. This chapter argues that it is not necessary for a woman to be a biological mother to possess mothering qualities. This chapter shows how some mother figures in African American women's fiction are either forced to part from their children under slavery or in later periods for other reasons—death, abandonment, work, to name a few. For example, Mina Mae in *A Mercy* allows her daughter to be taken away by the kindly Jacob Vaark as part of a business deal between her owner and him. Leafy in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* abandons her daughter because she was too young and found childcare a burden. Pilate takes on the role of guiding her brother's son to help her sister-in-law who is not assertive enough to have much say in the family. The mother Ruth is there, but reduced to the role of a wallflower most of the time by her bullying husband. It is left to the more resilient Pilate to counter her brother's unscrupulous commercialism with folk culture and faith. This chapter also shows that other mothering, when overzealous, can act as a barrier in the development of children like Jannie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Chapter 4, titled "Absent Mothering and its Contradictions" examines how "absent mothering" contests the accepted norms of motherhood. "Absent mothering" is the consequence of withdrawal of maternal attention and even love, for numerous reasons

as pointed out by Cori. The mother is somehow not in a position to offer emotional and physical care for her children: she remains detached and absent most of the time. This chapter looks into the reasons for such detachment or inability on the part of some mothers. Often it is seen that they had themselves suffered some negligence as children which had left a mark on them. It is seen that some mothers like Ruth remain passive because they have not known anything. However, in cases like that of Maud Martha in *Maud Martha*, we see a woman who has experienced parental indifference in the past and would like to ensure that her own child does not feel neglected on any count.

Chapter 5, titled “Interraciality and Motherhood” examines the dilemma of mothers and children caught up in the inter-racial situation in America. Biracial mothers represent spaces which, in novels like *Quicksand*, *Passing*, *Contending Forces* and *Comedy: American Style*, disrupt established notions of identity by questioning the boundaries of race and ethnicity from within. Mothers like Sappho Clark in *Contending Forces*, Karen Nilssen in *Quicksand*, or Olivia Cary in *Comedy: American Style*, reject their children due to their skin colour or because of the suspicion with which people of mixed blood in America were viewed at that time. This chapter presents the plight of mulatto children, as it shows how Helga’s rejection by her mother lies at the root of her inner insecurity or how Oliver’s rejection by his mother leads to his heartbreak. This chapter also focuses on the inner strength of a mother (Sappho Clark) who finally asserts her maternity revealing the truth of her mixed-race heritage.

The Conclusion deals with the findings of the individual chapters as well as the dissertation as a whole.

Even as the dissertation sticks to the above structure, it would not be out of place here to fill in on the background of African American motherhood. This dissertation no doubt addresses departures from traditional mother figures in the African American community as presented in the fiction of African American women writers, but to mark these departures or deviations, one of the common, stereotypical figures of maternity in life and in fiction can be briefly examined.

For African American women authors, writing turns out to be a means of reclaiming their own worth and subjectivity, because they have been defined by the dominant culture through the creation of stereotypes. This restricted their roles as a mother, wife

and woman. The image of the Black Mammy as enduring, faithful and compassionate was created during slavery by the dominant culture to rationalize the economic exploitation of black women as slaves. Female slaves became mothers as a consequence of rape or regular abuse. Enslaved women almost never got the chance to enjoy motherhood as they either had to nurse their mistresses white children or were sent to work in the fields, leaving their infants in the care of someone else:

Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black Women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal black female relationship to elite white male power. (*Thought 72*)

The motive behind creating a black female stereotype as the "Mammy" is not to empower black motherhood. Rather, it is a part of the larger agenda of the whites to dominate them under the guise of economic exploitation. One example of the Mammy stereotype is Dilsey in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Dilsey is the embodiment of what an ideal black woman should be. She is the only character who manages to survive the hard times and come out relatively unharmed at the end. Because of her strength and status as well as motherly qualities, Dilsey saves the Compson family from complete ruin. Though obviously plagued by declining health, Dilsey still maintains a tough schedule of cooking, cleaning, and serving. She remains the only stabilizing force in the Compson home. She is resolute, caring, strong, and religious and cares more for the degenerated family than Mr. or Mrs. Compson. Each of the characters in the novel, is dependent on Dilsey for something or the other which she manages to provide.

The portrayal of Dilsey, thus exemplifies the virtues associated with an ideal African American mother. The black "mammy" is supposed to raise and care for the children produced by the middle class white women. This patriarchal definition of the mammy provides an image of a mother who remains all the time concerned for her master's children giving least importance to her own. Even the son or daughter of the mammy is taught to be obedient and follow the mother's role. The black mother must put the white children's desires and needs before her own. Dilsey's son, Versh, is ordered by her

mother on one occasion to complete his servant role before he can eat his own dinner: “Take this tray up” Dilsey said, “And hurry back and feed Benjy” (Faulkner 45).

It is against this stereotypical role of the black mammy that African American women writers raised their voice. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and other women writers through their fictional as well as non-fictional writings consciously deny the roles assigned to them by society. According to Toni Morrison, African American people have been denied their subjectivity by being defined as “the racial other” in the dominant discourse and silenced. Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* argues that American writers in the nineteenth century tried to construct the American identity as a new white man through the dichotomy between self/other and us/them. As a result African Americans became “the other” in the consciousness of white writers as American writers transferred their “internal conflicts to a ‘blank darkness’ to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies” (*Playing* 38). To put it in another way, “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (*Playing* 52). It is, therefore, important for African American writers to claim their subjectivity, to bring about the social, political and historical transformations, by finding their voices in writing and becoming the subjects of their own narratives.

In order to draw a clearer picture of an African American mother, one must take into account all the hardships and sufferings she, her mothers and grandmothers were forced to face. In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” (1974) Alice Walker describes how a black woman was seen ever since the times of slavery:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, ‘the mule of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry.”(*Gardens* 2431).

Walker adds that they have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” “Mean and Evil Bitches,” “Castrators,” or “Sapphire’s Mama,” and states that “when [black women] have pleaded for understanding, [their] character has been destroyed.”(2431). She shows the difficult position of African American mothers, indicating all the sufferings they had to undertake. African American women have to suffer twice. First of all, they have to face the masculine oppression given by nature and culture. As it happens so often in

black families, black men suppress their wives, partners or daughters, even though they know how it feels to be colored. Secondly, they are met with racial prejudices and discrimination even by white women who know the deal of being a woman.

It is not that deliberately the writers deviate from the set roles of motherhood and maternity. There might have been some reasons behind their paradoxical nature of mothering. We cannot isolate it from the politics of inclusion, exclusion and expectation as their works are mostly political. The authors use their marginalized position as the “site of résistance, radical openness and possibility.”(hooks 153)

African American women writers challenge the representation of motherhood and mothering by the master narrative. For them the act of writing itself has become both a means of resistance and of survival. The female subjectivity represented in the novels written by African American women writers is multiple, contradictory and fluid as opposed to the unified, coherent, and fixed identity of male writers. These writers resist the single definition of racial and female identity as they deal with the pressures of motherhood.

The female slave’s experience became investigative ground for African American female novelists, and, echoing Jacobs’ experiences, motherhood emerged as a defining characteristic of these novelists’ art. 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 identify because they have attained it themselves. In the fifties and sixties, Gwendolyn Brooks and Paula Marshall, for example, defy the stereotypical slave images of the black mother as the pervasive mammy figure.

While Morrison and Walker demonstrate more specifically the horrible plight of mothers under slavery, writers like Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Pauline Hopkins on the other hand are more concerned with the racial discrimination faced by the African American mothers. Their way of protest and resistance is sometimes silent. The mother’s role presented in novels like Brooks *Maud Martha* is passive detached and emotionally absent. In creating such mothers novelists resist the age-old picture of stereotype mothers. Again in Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, the conflict is more inner than outer. It

describes the inner conflicts of a mixed race woman, who could not express her maternal love in fear of racial contradictions prevailing at that moment. A mother's inability to show the care and love to their children is also reflected in novels like Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*.

Based on the above arguments, the proposed work wants to study the mother figures interrogating maternity in the above mentioned novels written by African American female writers. The novels selected for the study are written by African-American women and all these novels are written in the twentieth century.