

CHAPTER ONE

INTERROGATING MATERNITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION

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The aim of this chapter is to examine the different types of maternity presented in African American fiction with the help of some of the theories of motherhood. Each maternal type is seen to interrogate or challenge existing categories generally acceptable in society. African American fiction focuses on motherhood to show that it is no ordinary role that the black mother fulfills, given the fact that she normally has to act both as care giver and provider.

According to Barbara Christian black women were invariably assigned stereotyped roles in literature, especially the white literature of the South, where they were presented as mammy figures. The mummies were “black in colour, fat, nurturing, religious, kind, above all strong and as Faulkner would call Dilsey, enduring. She relates to the world as an all embracing figure, and she herself needs or demands little, her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service”(*Black Feminist Criticism* 2). The mammy was expected to and capable of handling all the tasks and responsibilities handed onto her. Christian observes that the Mammy who was also a slave presented a harmless image of black womanhood, “unable because of her all giving nature to do harm...a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female” (2). There was no scope for individual difference in the portrayal Afro-American women characters in these writers.

At this time as Christian points out, African American writing was concentrating on the portrayal of the tragic mulatta. “In her very being, the mulatta called up the illicit crossing between cultures....The existence of the mulatta, who combined the physical characteristics of both races, denied their claim that blacks were not human...”(3). In the early nineteen twenties, when the mulatta was in danger of becoming a stereotype, it was again partially replaced by the mammy type who is capable of numerous jobs as well as nurturing. Despite assuming a mothering role these mummies were capable of fighting back, sustained as they were by their faith in folk beliefs.

Following Christian, Patricia Collins points out that enslavement of black women led to their being viewed as the other. This in turn, legitimized their oppression (*Black Feminist Thought* 68). She shows how holding the white woman as the ideal the mammy is held as

the opposite, an overtly physical type. Collins, however observes that the mammy image which is “central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” is deliberately promoted by white society:

controlling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior...As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior...By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression. (73)

The mammy image is expected to evoke conditioned behavior not just in the substitute or other mother but also to be the medium of cultural transmission. Collins goes on to say that The mammy image buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed. “Good”White mothers are expected to deny their female sexuality. In contrast, the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother....(74)

While the mammy image, looked upon by Collins as a means of exploitation of Black women, has become somewhat diluted in the twentieth century, there are still women who act as paid mammies. Since they look upon this idealized version of surrogate motherhood as a denial of womanhood, Black Feminist critics, including Christian and Collins, contest the generally circulated versions of good and bad Black maternity and bring out the complexities of Black motherhood.

Collins cites the Moynihan report with the bad Black maternity thesis— titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”(1965)—that “argued that African-American women who failed to fulfill their traditional “womanly” duties at home contributed to social problems in Black civil society” (75). It further held that “Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly could not properly supervise their children and thus were a major contributing factor to their children’s failure at school” (75). In contrast to these officially circulated versions of good or bad Black motherhood, Black women intellectuals “portray African American mothers as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions, or

who become beaten down by the incessant demands of providing for their families”(Collins 75-6).

According to Collins, because Black family structures contest or challenge traditional ideas of family setups and values, they are seen as deviant:

Black women’s failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood can then be identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency. Advancing ideas about Black cultural disadvantage via the matriarchal image worked to counter efforts by African-Americans who identified political and social policies as one important source of Black economic disadvantage.... The image of Black women as dangerous, deviant, castrating mothers divided the Black community. (77)

Emancipated women were seen as culturally poor and socially deviant. Black women were expected to be hard working and submissive. If they did not fit into the frames prepared by white patriarchal society catering to its own needs, they were deemed bad women and equally bad mothers. Stereotyping of Black motherhood into good or bad categories was a means of controlling the Black community or keeping it at a disadvantage.

Again, the reactions of Black male writers were equally one dimensional. As Collins points out: “Glorifying the strong Black mother represents Black men’s attempts to replace negative White male interpretations with positive Black male ones”(175). This was an image meant to counter the images promoted by White society, for the black men while glorifying their mothers/mother figures were not as considerate of their spouses or mothers of their own children. It is against this background of stereotyping of Black womanhood and maternity by both White and Black patriarchy that Black women writers and intellectuals stepped in to draw a more realistic and varied picture.

As Collins observes:

Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical. Ongoing tensions characterize efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation and efforts by African-American women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood. The controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother and the practices they justify are designed to oppress. (175)

Despite, White patriarchal efforts to reduce Black maternity to a few stereotypes by way of justifying oppression of such women during slavery and after, Black women have shown a certain resilience in overrunning these measures.

Affirming the complexities of African American maternity Collins points out that

Motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting...the necessity of self reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. These tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism. (175)

Given the expectations and so called norms of Black motherhood, African American women writers show how the African American community draws upon the traditions of motherhood from Africa as far as defining their own parameters of motherhood. The Black folk traditions offer support and sustenance for their needs and help them discover the sharing and empowering aspects of motherhood. Thus African American women's fiction offers models or types of motherhood identified mothering traditions in Africa—'Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks'—apart from some peculiarities germane to the American situation(176).

This dissertation uses Othermothers as a paradigm of motherhood where the biological mother is either dead, engaged in other work under slavery, present but not capable of proper nurture and guidance of the child/children, or simply not willing to take the responsibilities of motherhood. This is a tradition common to African communities where mothering is a shared community responsibility. Collins explains:

Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood. In confronting racial oppression, maintaining community-based child care and respecting othermothers who assume child-care responsibilities can serve a critical function in African-American communities. (180)

It follows that Othermothers may be relatives like aunts and grandmothers as well as neighbours or totally unknown persons who volunteer or are drafted in to help with the upbringing of the child. In America under slavery, the rearing of children was done by a woman who worked in the home while the birth mothers worked in the fields. Then again, through death or sale, mothers and children were separated during slavery, leaving the responsibility of childcare to somebody else. This tradition has endured in African American communities who still share some cultural link with their African forebears and counterparts.

Othermothers are discussed in Chapter 3 titled “Re-examining Other Mothering,” which deals with the novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison, and *Singing in the Comeback Choir* by Bebe Moore Campbell. In Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the concept of othermother is seen through Pilate, Milkman’s aunt, who fills in for Ruth who is laid back and subdued as a person and mother. Ruth tells her son Milkman that had it not been for Pilate he would not have been conceived or born. So it is left to the unconventional Pilate to give direction to the young man when he flounders as joins his father in business.

In *A Mercy* it is a stranger, Lina living and working in the same house owned by Jacob Vaark, who takes on the duties of looking after Florens when she arrives as an eight-year-old bewildered child as the result of a business deal between her Portuguese origin slave master and Vaark. Florens feels rejected by her mother after her mother offers her to Vaark instead of herself as part of that deal. Florens does not realize that her slave mother had marked the kindness in Vaark, a northerner, and hopes she would have a better life than with her. She had already noticed the sexual interest in her master’s eyes and her act of suggesting Florens was an attempt to save her from such a predicament. In Vaark’s house Florens helps out with the rest of the serving girls and attends on the mistress Rebeka Vaark.

In *Singing in the Comeback Choir*, it is the unconventional grandmother Lindy, who had been estranged from her daughter for a long time, who steps in to take care of Maxine, her granddaughter, after her widowed daughter is killed in an accident. Lindy or Malinda Walker is a famous singer and performer who had once walked out on her husband to pursue her singing career. Her daughter, Millicent, hates her for leaving her father and her settled home life. When Millicent dies in an accident, her mother Lindy comes and

collects her granddaughter Maxine to live with her as she continued with her singing career. When the novel opens we see the grown up Maxine returning to attend to her grandmother whose singing was long over, and who was sick and depressed. However, she manages to convince Lindy to take care of her health and her appearance and to perform in a group once more. Lindy's friends tell Maxine of the sacrifices or compromises she made to take care of Maxine.

This dissertation also examines maternal ruptures in Chapter 2 titled: "Maternity Under Rupture." Although the title has elements in common with Andrea O'Reilly's contentions regarding motherline rupture, the chapter examines the violent ruptures like killing, burning to death or suicide by gunshot perpetrated on their children or at least initiated by mothers. O'Reilly, on the other hand, looks for cultural and historical reasons which weaken the maternal values, through slavery, migration and dislocation. O'Reilly mentions the forsaking of funk or the tradition Black values contributing to the motherline rupture. For her it is the erosion of sustaining black cultural values and folk beliefs which undermine the maternal bond.

In this chapter, however, the rupture of the maternal bond which leads to mothers directly killing children, is brought on by 1) the extreme stress of slavery which does not allow the slave mother much options to sort out if the child's future is to be guarded; 2) the social, economic, mental and spiritual disintegration consequent upon the first World War; and 3) the shock registered by a teenaged son's recognition that his dark skinned presence is an embarrassment to his mother's social ambitions and indirectly his loving father and older siblings. In the last case, it is a mother's antipathy to coloured skin, her blaming her dark skinned son for being born, and her refusal to think that those same coloured genes run through her body, which pushes her sixteen year old son over the edge—to shoot himself. Thus the chapter examines physical and emotional ruptures in the relationship between mother and child.

Another type of mother figure is examined in Chapter 4 titled "Absent Mothering and its Contradictions." This chapter draws upon Jasmine Lee Cori's contentions about absent motherhood in *The Emotionally Absent Mother* (2010). Cori points out the characteristics of maternal 'absence,' both physically and figuratively and how it affects the children. She observes, "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. She doesn't create a real bond with her child" (*Emotionally Absent Mother* 81). This chapter examines the character of Ruth in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as an absent mother: who while being there all the time and even providing for their basic care, has allowed herself to be pushed to the margins by her bullying husband and unfeeling son. Ruth tells her son that she has tried all her life to fit into compartments made for her by her father and then her husband. It is not that she does not love her children. Rather, she appears to have lost her grip on her family, on reality itself to some extent. She is one of those hurt creatures hiding away from society.

The chapter also examines Maud Martha in the novel of the same name to show that the effects of absent mothering are not always bad. Maud Martha had always been ignored by her mother Belva Brown who preferred her sister Helen. While as a child this makes Maud Martha feel inadequate, once she gets married and has a child, she feels empowered and devotes herself to taking care of her child. Thus she grows through motherhood and nurturing despite suffering in her childhood.

Another kind of motherhood is examined in Chapter 5 titled: "Interraciality and Motherhood." This chapter deals with biracial or mulatta mothers and their children who are caught up in the complexities of the social situation in Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1900) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) as well as Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy: American Style* (1933). This chapter draws upon the mixed race studies of Edward B. Reuter, Werner Sollors and Lewis Gordon as well as Peter Aspinall and Miri Song. However, it does not directly derive from any sociological studies of mixed race identity. In *The Mulatto in the United States* Reuter writes that "They may occupy a place apart, form an outcast group with a social status inferior to that of either of the parent races....There may be various combinations of these roles and numerous transitional stages from one to another." (320). Gordon points out that "The biracial offspring who attempts to affirm both identities faces the social reality of both identities existing on unequal terms....the biracial child stands below whiteness and, by virtue of biraciality, in affirmation of black inferiority" (*Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader* 163). Then again, Aspinall and Song draw upon the studies of Rockquemore and Brunson to suggest "four possible identities:

border identity, located between predefined social categories (neither Black nor White... a *singular* identity, in which an individual's racial identity is exclusively either Black or White; a *protean identity*, where biracial individuals are able to cross boundaries between Black, White, and biracial; a *transcendent identity*, a self-understanding of being biracial that results in avoidance or rejection of any type of racial group categorization as the basis of personal identity. (*Mixed Race Identities* 20)

While none of these racial identity types are firmly articulated or presented in the texts selected for study, some of the characteristics or tendencies are seen in certain individuals or social situations.

This chapter demonstrates the tragic plight of mothers as well as daughters of mixed race heritage because of their inability and failure to fit either into the 'white world' or the 'black world'. Mothers like Sappho Clark in *Contending Forces*, Karen Nilssen in *Quicksand*, reject their mulatto children due to their inability to assert maternal love for reasons associated with society's disparaging attitude towards mixed-race people. In *Passing* Clare and Irene two fair skinned mulatta mothers adopt different approaches to this problem. Clare marries a White man who does not know the truth about her origins and passes as White, living dangerously according to Irene. On the other hand Irene marries a brown skinned man and is happy to be a part of the African American life of Harlem. Both are mothers, who do not allow colour problems to affect their children. Clare's daughter is in school in Europe, unaware of her mother's mixed blood. Irene's sons are not alike. While one is fair, the other has his darker skin colouring. Since there is no thought of assimilating with the white world, Irene tries to keep her young sons in ignorance of the racism which was a part of their lives. It is Clare who enjoys rejoining the Black world she had abandoned a decade ago, even at the risk of her husband suspecting something. When he does discover the truth about Clare, he accosts her in a Black couple's apartment, her involuntary withdrawal towards the window catapults her out of it down six floors to her death.

Then there is the story of Olivia Cary, a fair skinned biracial mother whose determination to assimilate fully with White society ruins the lives of her husband and children, even driving her younger son to death. While in interracial situations the

problems experienced by individuals are mainly social, perceived or experienced, in Fauset's novel the problems are more psychological as Olivia's sick worshipping of Whiteness, ensures that she does not allow her children to make natural choices throughout their lives.

This dissertation shows that race is an important factor in the identification of all the above mentioned types of African American Motherhood in the novels selected for study.

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