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Study on the Motherhood in Mercy

Sumaira Nazir* and Shafayayat**

ABSTRACT

Motherhood is worshipped in every society, thus in every context mother is equated to God - a life-giver. Motherhood provides them with the necessary abilities and character to be able to do something useful to others. This paper seeks to investigate the concept of motherhood in Toni Morrison's novel, A Mercy (2008). Morrison, the Nobel laureate, depicts the experiences and hardship of black women in her literary works. In Mercy, the concept of motherhood is broadened to include more than traditional mother-daughter ties. In this tale, mother love takes on a new meaning as a blood connection between all of the female characters. In her work, motherhood is unique, with a wounded spirit and a shattered self. The relationship between mother and kid is not easy, but it is strained. The focus of this study is on the Black mother and the assertive actions she takes to cope with the challenges of hopeless slavery. Morrison illustrates how slavery warped and shaped motherhood through the portrayal of an unconventional mother figure, Minha Mae, and her excruciating experiences, and reveals the circumstances that physically and emotionally separate mother and children. She rejects the conventional concept of motherhood and develops a view of black motherhood that is radically different from motherhood as practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture in terms of both maternal identity and role.

Keywords: Motherhood; Black mothers; A mercy; Toni Morrison; Racism.

1.0 Introduction

Mothers play an important role in society's growth and development. They are constantly attempting to cope with the challenges of motherhood as well as society's expectations of what a mother's relationship with her children should be. Toni Morrison has retraced the stories of women against a backdrop of maternal love and responsibility. Morrison's novel *A Mercy* is centred on the mother-child bond. It tells the story of an enslaved mother, Minha Mae, who, in order to protect her daughter, Florens, from sexual abuse by her slave master, sells her to another white slaveholder who she believes will be less abusive. Florens, a 16-year-old girl who serves as the narrator, lives on the plantation of Portuguese slave owner D'Ortega. The plot takes place in the 1680s when the slave trade in America was still in its early stages. Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch adventurer and trader,

runs a small business in the harsh North. Despite his disregard for dealing in "flesh," he accepts a small slave girl named Florens as payment for a bad debt owed to a plantation owner in Catholic Maryland. Florens, having been rejected by her mother, seeks love, first with Lina, an older servant woman at her new master's house, and later with the handsome blacksmith, an African who has never been enslaved.

A Mercy depicts the life and circumstances of Minha Mae, a slave mother. She works for D'Ortega, a businessman and slave owner from Portugal. Minha Mae has a son and a daughter. Florens is the name of the daughter. Florens is the central character in the novel. Florens and her mother, Minha Mae, were originally owned by D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner who owed money to Jacob, a tradesman. When Jacob arrives at D'Ortega's plantation to collect his payment, D'Ortega requests that Jacob accept a slave as payment. Jacob is hesitant because he believes slaves are not

*Corresponding author; CT University, Ferozepur Road, Ludhiana, Punjab, India
(E-mail: sumunazir2@gmail.com)

**CT University, Ferozepur Road, Ludhiana, Punjab, India (E-mail: hussainshafayat11@gmail.com)

commodities. As the narrative reveals, “Flesh was not his commodity” (21). Maternal love and its expression are often difficult to grasp, especially when a mother is forced to push her daughter to a lesser degree of evil. Jacob is taken aback when the woman offers to have her own daughter taken away. He is unable to comprehend the genuine concern that stems from a mother’s fear and helplessness. He readily accepts the deal because he believes the daughter is an “ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away” (34). Jacob accepts the mother’s offer because he believes Florens will be a good companion for his wife Rebekka’s loneliness.

Florens thus joins Lina and Sorrow and remains as a servant in Jacob’s home. Morrison shows how difficult it is to grasp maternal love through Minha Mae’s decision to give her daughter to a merchant, Jacob. Desperate to spare her daughter Florens from “the lips of an old married couple” (160), she asks Jacob to take Florens because she knows slaves, especially female slaves, have “no protection” (161). In her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Anna Jacobs states, “Slavery is dreadful for males, but it is considerably more terrible for women” (86). Minha Mae is well aware of the dehumanisation of hopeless servitude, therefore she does this to push her daughter to a lower level of depravity in order to protect her from worse persecution and sexual harassment. Inexplicably, their unseen relationship is revealed.

The story emphasises the advantages of being a mother. It indicates a new dimension in mother-child relationships that cannot be explained by old conceptions or traditions. In *Feminism for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, hooks argue that “marginality [can be seen] as much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (150). Hooks displays black women’s marginalisation status, which prevents them from attaining their rights; it is also a sight of resistance because it promotes black women’s resistance capacity. To challenge and deny their victimised and marginalised status, black women, such as Minha Mae, resist dominating practises by loving their children and claiming their natural rights as mothers. Minha Mae’s maternal concern for her daughter is justified. She is certain of her arguments. She believes that if she tells her daughter Florens the

truth about the potentially disastrous consequences of her staying with her mother, she will be persuaded. Justifying her decision, she explains to her.

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. (166-7).

Minha Mae expresses her maternal concern to her daughter Florens. She asks Jacob Vaark to take her (Florens) away from D’Ortega’s plantation to protect her from sexual abuse because she regards Jacob as a human child who is kind to his servants. Minha mae wishes to keep Florens close to her. But she is afraid of Florens’ security when she notices the master’s lust for her daughter in his eyes. She does not want her daughter to face the challenges of slavery and live the life of a helpless woman, as she has. She informs her “One chance, I thought. There is no protection, but there is difference” (166). Minha Mae sees Jacob as Florens’ only hope of escaping. She works hard as a responsible mother to provide a better future for her daughter Florens. In slavery, she faces the same dilemma that many mothers do. Hooks believes that “in the midst of a brutal racist system that did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist the system” when reflecting on the brutality of racist society on Blacks (144). Hooks believes that the brutal racist system devalues black people. A black mother’s responsibility is to value her children’s lives. This concept is well illustrated in Frederick Douglass’ autobiographical work *The Narrative of Fredrick Douglass*. Douglass describes his mother as walking twelve miles at night, whenever possible, to embrace her son once. It also appears to be true in this case because Florens’ mother, Minha Mae, crosses all boundaries in order to give her daughter a less dehumanised life. She refuses to play the helpless mother. She does everything she can to save her daughter’s life from slavery and oppression.

Morrison depicts and situates motherhood as a source of power in this novel. Andrea O’ Reilly explains black women’s experiences and opinions on motherhood in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. “Building upon black women’s experiences of, and perspectives on motherhood,

Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture”(1). O’ Reilly argues that Black women’s experiences define a distinct maternal identity. In addition, the roles they play are not the same as those required for mothers in dominant society. Minha Mae’s perspective as a mother is supported by her reasoning, which shows how she addresses the matter. As a kind and sensitive mother, she foregoes parental attachments and places her daughter in the care of another slave owner, whom she believes will be less abusive. By bending and rearticulating the powers inherent in black women, Morrison’s perspective on parenting allows black women to revert to negative views of femininity.

Minha Mae is depicted as a wonderful mother in *A Mercy* because she decides to distance herself from her daughter in order to give her with a better existence. She reads Jacob’s mind like an experienced woman and asks him to accept her daughter rather than money. Florens carries this secret in her heart, which she reveals later in life and displays through her interactions with her adversaries. Florens is about eight years old when she is traded.

To Jacob for money. She is perplexed by her mother’s refusal to sell her son as a slave, and she remembers with naive sadness. As she tells it:

Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minah mae begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due (8).

Florens notices everything but doesn’t understand anything when Minha Mae asks Jacob Vaark to take her daughter. Minha Mae requests that her daughter be taken instead of her son, as she wants to protect her from her cruel master. “It wasn’t a miracle—it was a mercy,” Florens’ mother says (167). Florens, an eight-year-old child, finds it difficult to comprehend her mother’s act of kindness. The horrors and dread of slavery in a lovely residence are shown in Morrison’s description of D’Ortega’s property. D’Ortega contains a large farmhouse where the slave trade is successfully

carried out. D’Ortega does not waste any time in supplying slaves. Slaves who remain there have a terrible life. Florens describes her time working on D’Ortega’s tobacco estate, where she was subjected to his family’s abuse. As she explains, she spends her days “picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds”, and “nights on the floor of the cookhouse” with her mother, Minha mae (5). Florens says that the life at D’Ortega’s plantation was miserable.

Florens’ pain and emotions are clearly reflected in the novel. As a young girl she only knows the decision of her mother. She expresses this thing in her words saying, “mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose . . . holding the little boy’s hand” (8). Later in life it becomes difficult for Florens to maintain a good relationship with others as she is obsessed with her mother offering her rather than her brother. Florens experiences a lack of support as she grows up without her mother’s love. Her thoughts alternate between the past and the present. Her mother’s memories abound in the past, but she has no room in her present existence. She exhibits odd conduct at times. Her mother’s pain in offering her to Jacob is difficult for her to bear. Florens has a strong desire to love and enjoys being loved. Lina and Sorrow, the other slaves at Jacob’s house, are unable to fulfil it. She continues to deepen her relationship with the blacksmith, but it never becomes intimate. Jacob’s residence serves as a safe haven for her, shielding her from oppression and physical harm. At Jacob’s house, Little Florens tries to meet everyone’s expectations she is scared that they will abandon her as her mother did. It is difficult for her to understand the deep love and attachment of her mother, who offers her to Jacob Vaark to save her from sexual abuse and violence. As a woman sexually abused by her master, Florens’ mother, Minha mae understands that the woman in slavery has no protection. As the narrative reveals, “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (193). When she sees that the tall man, Jacob Vaark, sees Florens “as a human child” (195), she chooses to give him her child because there “was no animal” in his heart (191).

Florens never understands her mother’s deep attachment to her and never treats this ‘separation’ as a mercy. She is tortured by the agony of abandonment all over her life. By crafting the storey

of an abandoned infant and helpless mother, the novel investigates the black slave woman's identity in America. It is designed to speak for all the suffering mothers who have been denied a voice throughout history. *A Mercy* is set in a time before racism was recognised as a justification for slavery. It's the time before "slavery and black married," as Morrison puts it. Morrison effectively depicts how racial, cultural, and gender prejudice affect Black women. In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy: Critical Approaches*, Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally highlight Morrison's ability to tell stories in a way that represents "an interface with cultural artifacts and foundational myths" (1).

The novel centers on the theme of ecstasy and agony of the Black mother. *Mercy* emphasises the wonderful elements of parenting, even if they are not always altruistic and supportive. Angela Davies asserts in *Women, Race, and Class* that "greater degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women-defined patterns of mothering, in and out of its biological mandates and social constructs" (142). Davies highlights the disparities between patriarchal notions of motherhood and women-defined patterns of mothering, emphasising the importance of women-defined patterns of mothering in making parenting an empowering experience. This perspective frees the institution of motherhood from patriarchal ideas of motherhood, which place women in a box. The typical picture of a woman as a mother is deconstructed in this work.

2.0 Conclusion

The analysis of Morrison's narratives reveals that motherhood is a profound act of resistance that identifies itself as essential and intricate to black women's counter-response to racism and sexism. Reflecting Morrison's definition of motherhood, Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (Literary Conversations Series), clarifies:

The most liberating thing that ever happened to me... Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of normal 'other'... I could not only be mewhatsoever that was- but somebody actually needed me to be that. It's different from being a daughter... The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want...

Also you could begin to see the world through their eyes again- which are your eyes. I found that extraordinary. (270-71).

Morrison's perspective on motherhood contrasts with the dominant image of the mother in White society, which assumes mothers are ever-bountiful, ever-giving, submissive, and self-sacrificing, and are never overwhelmed by their children's demands. Morrison presents the reader with an ambivalent but emotionally intense portrayal of unconventional motherhood, in which motherhood is both joyous and heartbreaking, a salvation and a sacrifice.

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