

Disintegrating Mother-Daughter relationships in Toni Morrison's novels-Beloved, A Mercy and God Help the Child

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ABSTRACT

*The paper aims to understand the disintegrating mother-daughter relationships and the life of the 'Black' mothers as seen in the novels of Toni Morrison such as **Beloved, A Mercy and God Help the Child**. The paper focuses on the three powerful novels of Toni Morrison to understand the complexities in the lives of the female protagonists and how their experiences affected their relationships with their daughters. Women in such novels were physically and emotionally affected by the traumatic experiences of their past, which were most often associated with the social issues of race, sex and class faced by the Afro- Americans. This led to the disintegration of their social and cultural values and even disrupted their intimate familial relationships. In such cases, the daughters or the elder girls in such families witnessed the pain and the humiliation faced by their mothers and they also became soft targets for their mother's outbursts of anger and frustrations. 'Black' Mothers of Afro -America were the tough 'mamas' who moulded their daughters to face the challenges of the racist environment, thus enabling their children to fight all the challenging situations in life, yet there were some black mothers who helplessly killed their daughters and pushed them to the slave trade in a frantic and desperate attempt to safeguard their daughters. These mothers who often saw their daughters as the prototypes of their selves, resorted to violent and brutal means of aggression and punishment to save their daughters from further agonies and humiliations which they expected their daughters would face later in life. Interconnecting these issues to the theoretical aspects of Trauma and Object Relations theory helps to analyse the workings of these complicated relationships and how they were deeply ingrained into the social structures of the Afro - American society.*

Keywords:

Disintegrating, Traumatic, Disrupt, Humiliation, Aggression, Endure, Trauma

FULL MANUSCRIPT

Toni Morrison the inimitable contemporary Afro- American author was the first woman in Black history to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. She is the author of many novels, including *The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Paradise, Love, Zula, A Mercy and God Help the Child*. Toni Morrison has been a much-researched author, yet still, she remains as a fascination for the true lovers of literature. The much worked out themes of Toni Morrison include racial discrimination, colonialism, jazz, sexual depictions, slavery, narrative voice and the aspects of

motherhood. She has also admirably succeeded in creating a 'penetrating view of the Black motherhood'.

Toni Morrison makes her novels appealing to her readers with her brilliant style of narration and by dealing with the issues faced by the Afro-American society at large. The difficulties and obstacles faced by the Black mothers in the upbringing of their children is a major and recurring theme in most of her novels. The strong emotional attachment and affinity shared by the Afro-American mothers and daughters imparted strength and self-confidence to their relationships and helped them to survive in such a hostile racist and sexist environment.

Motherhood in Toni Morrison is all about personal and political empowerment, an act of resistance which was integral and important for the Afro-Americans in their fight for freedom, against racism and sexism. This helped them to achieve a feeling of well-being for themselves and the people of their community. The mothers moulded their daughters to retort and fight against the oppressive demands of their white masters and to claim for their identity and position in the society.

To provide a background to the picture of oppressed motherhood, it is necessary to understand the history behind this brutal treatment. Slave trade and racial discrimination in America originated when the Dutch shippers sold African slaves to the colonists. The White colonists considered Blacks as inferior, because of their race. The slaves who were thus forced to work in their fields and factories were subjected to inhuman treatment. Punishments such as whipping, branding and mutilation were common. The slaves were treated as animals who were devoid of emotions or dignity. The women were also enslaved, and they had to bear violent tortures, sexual abuses and rapes and their children were also exposed to a similar fate. The slaves this became a product or a commodity which could be obtained at a fair price.

Morrison's novels elucidate the conditions of motherhood in a slavish society wrapped by the severe conditions of slavery and racial discrimination. The paper helps to understand the distressing traits in motherhood and their foregoing actions, which is most often seen as resulting from slavery and racial discrimination. Toni Morrison, in one of her interviews, states how the Black mothers were persevering, nurturing and how they provided to the cultural bearing. The absence of such qualities would lead to their personal and cultural destruction. The paper thereby focuses on the strained mother-daughter relationships and how it affected the daughter's physical and emotional well-being. Toni Morrison explains the intricate mother-daughter relationship in her novels and how it transforms into a bond of love and friendship. As the daughter grows and matures into puberty and adulthood, the mother-daughter relationship assumes a profound significance, as the mother considers the daughter as a prototype of her own self. The mother sees a miniature form of herself in her daughter. The mother goes to the extent of sympathising and empathising with her daughter figure and tries to understand the pains and the traumas faced by the daughter as she enters into a world of conflicting relationships. The mother who lives all her life with the history of racial discrimination and slave trade has nothing pleasant to provide for her daughter, except the facts of her own unstable life and relationships. The slave woman feels that she has to rescue her child from this demeaning existence, and this can be done either by ignoring her completely or

by pushing her to the burning embers of pain and humiliation provided to her by the hegemonic society.

Trauma theory is based on the fundamental premise on how the past traumatic events of one's life such as neglect, sexual abuse and violence affects and shapes the psyche of the individual. Trauma theory proves how the past traumatic experiences shape the memory and affect the identity, lives and the memories of the individuals. Trauma studies developed in the 1990s relied on the Freudian ideologies of how the experiences in the lives of the individuals shape their lives and affect their psyche. Traumatic moments from an experience haunts and torments the individuals, and it also fragments the psyche of the individual with scarring wounds and tormenting memories. Through memories, the trauma of a past repressed experience assaults the individual thereby inflicting pain and agony in the individual. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the killing of the baby Beloved is a reverberating cyclic pain in the mind of the mother which creates feelings of guilt and agony in the mother. The disturbing traumatic memories torment the young girl, Bride who was deprived of maternal love and affection only for being born with a 'blue-black' complexion. She forged false sexual accusations against her white teacher only to win the love and affection of her black mother. In the case of all these women characters, it can be seen that it is the traumatic relationships of their past which caused anxiety and ambiguity in their lives and relationships. Sethe the mother had to kill her child to safeguard her new-born from the clutches of slavery. She said that she had to kill her child so that no man would ever 'dirty' her. She didn't want her child to be 'commodified, public and unowned' with 'no protection' (163)

Here the traumatic memories lead the characters to a loss of identity and separation from their ancestors and their cultural past. Trauma builds up the recurrence and the magnitude of pain and agony in the characters leading to a cathartic climax through their violent and brutal acts. Through memories, the characters re-enact the violence and the pain within themselves.

Object Relations is a theoretical framework which studies the relationship between people, particularly within the inner family circles such as the mother-child relationships, the husband-wife relationship, the sibling relationships and so on. The basic tenet of this theory diverges from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories which stated that human beings are motivated by sexual or aggressive behaviours when they try to forge new relationships, as the failure to form easy relationships creates new problems. Here in the case of all the three novels, it can be seen that the characters divulge in their own violent and volatile ways of behaviours like killing one's child, selling children for slave trade or disowning one's children. Here these aggressive behavioural traits are the impulsive acts by the protagonists to create a semblance of normalcy and order to their otherwise disrupted lives. They felt that their lives have been scattered and disfigured by the male hegemonic powers and such brutal actions would alleviate pain and an acute sense of insecurity in their hapless existence. They felt miserable that their lives have been disfigured by the power structures of the society and there is nothing they could do to further improve their lives, but their only hope was to rescue their children from such a miserable existence. When the 'Black Mammy'- the strong mother figure, felt that her arms were not strong enough to protect her kindred, she strived to act and resolve or to save her children from yet another miserable existence.

The novel *Beloved* set in 1800's- narrates the poignant dilemmas faced by Sethe, a mother who commits the heinous act of killing her daughter. The mother in the novel undertakes the act of homicide, as it was the only exit criteria to safeguard her daughter from the clutches of slavery. Sethe recalled how her mother in law neither recognised her face nor her children's faces. Sethe herself was never nursed by her mother. The growth of a girl which is a proud moment for any mother does not arouse any sensations in Sethe.

Morrison reveals the emotional attachment of the Black mothers who strived to instil confidence and strength in their daughters. They were taught by their mothers to fight and resist the racist and sexist environment which is often symbolised by the Afro American women as 'Black Mammy'-the powerful symbol for South Afro-American mother.

In her novels, Toni Morrison deals with the life of the Black mothers and their struggle in upbringing their children. Most of the novels deal with the themes of alienation, struggle, racism, effects of racism on motherhood, the toxic relationships in the lives of the Afro-Americans and the process of enslavement. The mothers strived to empower their children to survive in the cruel environment, and most often in such cases, the mothers assumed the role and function of the men in the family. They became the authoritative dictatorial parent who strived to resist the subversion and attitude towards racism. They struggled to create an identity for themselves, for their daughters and their deprived communities.

The mother Sethe in the novel *Beloved*, kills her daughter, only to free her from the clutches of slavery and colonization. The baby daughter's ghost torments and haunts the mother. The inner agony and conflict in the mother, Sethe reaches the climax when she decided to kill the daughter by slitting her baby daughter's slender throat, to free her from the clutches of the slavish society. The mother faces the mental agony and the inner trauma of being torn between the love for her daughter and the pain of her mother seeing her child becoming another slave fit enough for the slave trade in a brutal masochistic society. The homicide is the mother's way of emancipating her child from the evils and the sinister forces of the society which might force her daughter to the slave trade. The mother here becomes emotionally fettered, as she consciously deprives herself of her daughter's love and affection. The inner conflict and agony of Sethe, the mother is seen when the ghost of the dead daughter haunts the mother.

"Beloved, you are my sister forces, you are my daughter

You are my face; you are me

I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved; you are mine

You are mine; you are mine

I have your milk, I have your smile; I will have to take care of you." (255-256)

The pain and the emotional affinity of the Afro-American mothers controls the lives of the children. The mother-daughter relationship assumes authority, love and mutual recognition through such feelings and sacrifices.

A Mercy (2009) narrates the tale of Florens, a slave girl who confesses on how her mother chose to sell her as a payment mode of debt to her master. Set in the background of the early 1680s, the novel deals with the anguish and agonies of motherhood. Here the baby brother was spared just because he was a boy, who could later become the breadwinner of the family. The death of the father forced the mother into an insecure and lonely world, where she had to struggle to meet both the ends.

As in many other novels of Toni Morrison, motherhood assumes a major significance in this novel. The story deals with maternal feelings as seen and reflected through the other female characters such as Sorrow, Lina, Rebecca and Florens. The novel deals with the traumatic separation of a slave mother from her daughter and how it affects both their lives and their psyche. The women suffer inner turmoil and agony as they struggle to express their 'untold maternal experiences' in a crude patriarchal society.

"To be a female in this world is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below."

The novel delineates the complex intricate relationships which are bound by the slave trade and how it results in the ruptured mother-daughter relationship in a racist society. The Black women express their agonies through their violent and through their crude modes of expression. They combat the horrors of slavery and strive to safeguard their little girls from the eyes of the white predators. In the novel, the young Afro-American girl Florens has ripped apart from her mother at a very tender age. She became a mere commodity in the slave trade when she was sold by the plantation owner Ortega to yet another slave master Jacob Vaark to whom he owed a huge debt. Florens's mother was the first target for the slave trade and later it became the daughter who stood innocently clinging next to her mother. Here Florens became a commodity who was bartered off in the trade process. The mother begged and pleaded to Vaark to leave her and to take her daughter:

"Please Senhor. Not me. Take my daughter. Not me." (20)

Vaark, the Dutch dealer accepted the deal and took Florens to take care of his ailing wife and also to whet his sexual appetite. Here slavery is shown as a recurring theme, as the lives of the slaves remain disrupted within their lonely and disintegrating relationships.

God Help the Child (2015) is more of a contemporary novel, where the author explains how the sufferings of childhood can shape and misshape the life of an adult. The novel revolves around a vexed mother-daughter relationship and states how childhood abuse affects adulthood. The protagonist in the novel is a young woman who calls herself Bride (aka. Lula Ann Bridewell) is a stunningly beautiful and bold young Afro-American lady who has a successful career in life. Her dark complexion added to her grace, beauty and elegance. From her early childhood, her parents denied her even the simplest forms of love, since she was a dark child born to a white couple. Due to her sheer anger and frustration, she had to compromise on her lover, Booker as well. Bride's childhood memories revolve around the memories of her mother and how she longed for the maternal love and concern. The young girl felt rejected and disillusioned as she was denied the maternal care and affection due to her black complexion. As a young child, she witnessed the anger, denial and frustration in her mother's attitude.

"Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me...Rinse me, actually after a half-hearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray, she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated -bed without supper, lock me in my room."

The mother initially felt the strange desire to strangulate the child, but the alternate way of upbringing the unwanted child was to alienate and ignore the child deliberately, by avoiding her 'witchy eyes' and 'too thick' lips. In this novel, Toni Morrison interrogates the readers with a puzzling question.

"What do we do with the sins of the child, when the child's sins were endangered by a force against which she was powerless."

The young child felt miserable and guilty when she associated herself with her school classmate Sophia Huxley to make a false accusation against her white teacher for sexually molesting her. Through this was a false accusation Bride felt overjoyed for the first time in her life as she won the appreciation and applause from her mother.

Paradoxically though, the timid young black girl grew up to be a successful entrepreneur running a successful cosmetic industry business. Here Toni Morrison revamped the social constructs of female beauty which was most often a by-product of a consumerist society and attitude. The transformation of Bride to a beautiful sophisticated girl reveals the shift in the Black obsession towards beauty and how the Blacks yearned for a radical transformation from the Western notions of beauty and grace. This is quite evident in the statements of the fashion expert Jeri, who states:

"Black is the new Black...Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilised world."

Here Morrison strikes a dig at the society, where the issues of racism and colourism still exist. This is not an issue about a particular country or continent, but a universal issue, as people who raise their voice against social issues are subjected to inhuman treatment. Through her narratives, Morrison raises a clarion call for social and political awareness, as it can herald a new era for change. Toni Morrison sensitively deals with such issues and tries to depict the intensity of such issues in its very essence. The social stigmas created by the painful past had a deep impact on the Afro-American society and their psyche. Analysing the theoretical aspects of Trauma and Object Relations theory helps to analyse the mindset of the individuals who lived their collective experiences with the fear of being 'oppressed' and subjugated and it also helps to understand the inner turmoil and confusions faced by the protagonists.

Morrison challenges the existing and prevailing stereotypical notions of Black women as virtuous/ tolerant mothers or as promiscuous women. Mothers in such novels are freed from all such biological relations. Morrison presents the factual details of women who were abused both physically and mentally, harassed, challenged and exploited in the white hegemonic society. In such a distorted society, one finds all sorts of painful reverberations of unmarried women who lived with the painful reminders of their illegal and immoral relationships- mostly when their progeny remained illegal, illegitimate, unrecognised or as a remembrance of a rape or a forced relationship.

Black women themselves were stereotyped as the big fat 'black mammy' who lived only for their children. They wanted to improve the lives and the conditions of their children and they became virtuous and selfless female prototypes. Mothers like Eva, Sethe and Harriet strived to save their children from the drudgery of the slavish existence by shoving their daughters to the forefront. But most often they became the painful victims of the cruel chauvinistic society. Through the mother in the novel *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison reiterates the helplessness of the Black woman in a hegemonic society.

"You stood there in those shoes and the tall men laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said to you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not as pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was mercy offered by a human. I stayed on my knees." (166-167)

Here Black mothers became the victims of male oppression as they were only meant to satisfy the lustful desires of their white masters. Though the mothers could not alleviate the pain and the anxieties for their daughters, they strived to hide their children from the cruel gaze of the white masters. Carl Jung states how this remained as a stigma and as a reverberating pain in the psyche of the mother-daughter relationships.

"The psyche pre-existent to consciousness (...) participates in the maternal psyche on the one hand, while on the other it reaches across to the daughter's psyche (...) every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter." (188)

Toni Morrison associates the lives of slaves in par with the perverse notions of slavery, as the external violence disrupts and destroys the mother-daughter relationship. In the case of *Beloved*, one witnesses a severing relationship between Sethe and her mother and a similar relationship between Sethe and her daughters. In *A Mercy*, Morrison narrates the pain of a slave mother who had to desert her child to gain freedom from a slave master whereas in *God Help the Child*, it is the abandonment of the mother and the dissociation of maternal bonding which creates ripples in the psyche of a young forlorn child.

Toni Morrison relates the pain and the callousness of the mother with the associations of shame, guilt and fear in the daughters as they had to live their lives with their individual and collective share of traumatic experiences. The mothers yearn for liberty and freedom for their daughters and they strived to empower their daughters against the brutalities of slavery. They devise their plans, forms of resistance and retaliate against the injustice meted out to them- by trying to kill their children, selling them to the highest bidder, rejecting them and abandoning them to safer places in a mad and frantic rush to protect them from the burning embers of slavery. As they muster courage and power to survive in their hostile racist environment, they suffer physical and mental abuse from their white masters and their menfolk. They detest the fact that they are being bargained, negotiated and sold like a commodity to the highest bidder. They express their love and concern towards their children through violent and brutal manifestations thereby ensuring safety and wellbeing of their children. The novels of Toni Morrison resonate the pain and the hardships faced by mothers who sacrificed all their lives for their children. This is

reflected in the words of Florens who states that she was devoid of pain and agony after devoting all her life for the sake of her children.

"I never cry. Even when the woman steals my cloak and my shoes and I am freezing on the boat, no tears come." (69)

Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis reiterates the same notions in their book *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*

"What was startlingly evident...was the teaching of survival skills to females for their survival in and for the survival of the Black community. Intra-group survival skills were given more importance and credence than survival skills for dealing with the White society at large. There is a tremendous amount of teaching transmitted by Black mothers to their daughters that enable them to survive, exist, succeed and to be important to and for the Black communities... Black daughters are actually 'taught' to hold the Black community together."(106)

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