



Vol. 10, No. 4

CLRI Nov 2023

Page 79-95

## Toni Morrison on Unconventional Motherhood, Maternal Abandonment and Redefined Love

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Abstract: Motherhood is a prominent theme in Toni Morrison's works that she has emphasized in her novels as well as her essays. Through the thematic exploration of her stories, Morrison philosophizes the power and the sacrifices that flow from motherhood and attempts to dismantle the patriarchal poster image of a mother and the experience of motherhood. Building upon the same, she beautifully sews together her political stance on black womanhood, her ideas on slavery, its aftermath in the United States vis-à-vis the infinite struggles of maternal identity.

In the essay, the authors have tried to analyze and anatomize the paradigm of stereotypical notions associated with motherhood. By deconstructing Toni Morrison's 'Sula,' 'A Mercy,' and 'Beloved,' the authors have attempted to explain how Morrison rebukes the status quo and run-of-the-mill motherly standards and writes fearlessly on concepts that have been seldom evaded and diverted by her contemporaries. By making a comparative analysis of her works, the authors have illustrated how Morrison tackles different themes of black womanhood; developing them from day-to-day experiences to an evolution of a new resistance. She enables, through her characters, African American women to come forward, counter, and challenge the discourse on black womanhood.

Different eras beget different expectations where women are romanticized, and their traditional roles are reaffirmed. It, therefore, becomes pivotal for voices like Morrison's to encourage women all around through her innocent portrayal

of the complexities of societal affirmation. For example, she disregards the conventional understanding that biological mothers are the sole domain holder of motherhood.

The authors have discussed Morrison's background to understand why she writes the way she does. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 and was one of the flagbearers of Black Feminist literature; due to her flair for dismantling complex and controversial subjects without stripping them off of reality. And as she always said, the power of changing the world for the better lies not in the great people we mourn, but with ourselves, the essay is an attempt to honor her unmatched legacy.

Keywords: Motherhood, Mother Hunger, Love, Toni Morrison, Sula, A Mercy, Beloved, Sorrow, Slavery.

## Introduction

Through a thematic focus on motherhood, friendship, and empathy, Morrison explores the multifaceted expression of love in the various mothers of her novels. In 'Sula' she compels the readers to rethink the definition of a quintessential 'good mother.' Despite it being her second novel, the characters ooze raw emotion, and the writing is emotionally-charged. The absence of punctuation within the prose symbolizes the urgency of the plot. In 'Beloved,' one of her most acclaimed works, the protagonist, a slave woman who runs away from her owner, kills her daughter to put her "where she was safe." These bold yet close-to-home storylines enthrall the readers and make them wonder about the power and the courage it takes to be a mother.

*"And the eggs?" she asks.*

*"They hatch alone," says Lina.*

“Do they live?” Florens’ whispering is urgent.

“We have,” says Lina

— *A Mercy*

Through story-telling based on intra-feminine communities, engendered institutions of oppression, and their repressive repercussions on gender-specific experiences, Morrison grants a voice to the unheard, the unsung, and the unknown. Powerful, dominant, and intriguing characters with familial ties strangled to their tyrannical pasts are portrayed through forlorn paternal love and sequestered children.

The collective reading of *A Mercy*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* enabled the authors to deconstruct the multifaceted role of mothers. While we have been conditioned to construct an image of a mother conventionally, Morrison fabricates an alternate imagery. Through her oeuvre, she elucidates how mothers are not mere ideals of love and kindness. This essay is a conscious effort to analyse the destabilization of the traditional norms of motherhood through the stories of Hannah, Eva, Rebekka, Lina, and Florens’ mother to convey to the readers that there is no fairy tale or happy endings for the mothers of these novels. Instead, it beautifully embraces the brokenness of the mothers in light of the incessant vulnerability and ingrained stereotypes that try to bring them down. It captures the spirit of motherhood beyond the biological definition that it carries.

## **Of Slavery & Black Motherhood: Dismantling Archaic Definitions**

Toni Morrison is one of the flagbearers of Black Feminist literature due to her flair for dismantling complex and controversial subjects without stripping them off their rawness. The relationship between feminism and motherhood is closely related albeit complex. Literature has long perceived

motherhood as a normal adult responsibility of women in an essentially patriarchal society. Morrison's stories hail the reconstruction of a "mother" from a narrow biological category into an independent identity and linked her true liberalization from male dominance to unfettered and non-conventional parenthood. We could interpret the same understanding of this theory when we take a peek into the narratives woven by Morrison. In *Sula* and *A Mercy*, motherhood reflects the various manifestations as well as the consequences of various relationships during slavery and its aftermath. Morrison portrays these manifestations through different sets of mothers and daughters. The mother-daughter duos, the motherless daughters, and daughterless mothers form an essential part of the plot in *A Mercy* and *Sula*. While exploring this, Morrison also paints the canvas with a deep hue of motherhood splattered through the book concocted with a tapestry of characters and their experiences.

In *A Mercy*, Florens is bought by Jacob Vaark, offered by her mother in exchange for herself to repay their master's debt. The Vaark household has three other women residing there when Florens arrives. Rebekka who is the Mistress, Lina her loyal slave, and Sorrow the inept slave. In this novel, Morrison dwindles into the distinction between slavery and race. She attempts to tackle and enunciate the segregation between slaves that were born and encultured in America, and slaves that were imported. 'A Mercy', quite literally, translates to a mother's plea for forgiveness; a prayer for survival, and hope for a better future. Each story is intertwined and layered upon one another in a manner that apprises the reader gradually of common threads and class divides. As it travels from one character to another, the story deconstructs the idea and concept of motherhood. Morrison implores the readers to understand that motherhood is not a binary experience and certainly, not a comparison of the age-old adjectives that have been plastered on to it. It is as dynamic and discrete as the

women who experience it or long for it. Moreover, Morrison weaves this solidarity between these women, irrespective of their background, race, class, or color.

*Sula* weaves a story of two young girls, the protagonist, and Nel who reside at the Bottom. While Nel comes from a rigid and conventional household, Sula is an eccentric girl who has a peculiar family. Despite the polarising background, the two girls find solace in each other's company but have a tragic childhood. In their adulthood, Nel settles down as a conventional mother whereas Sula embraces her wild independence and never marries. Sula along with her grandmother and mother paint the most unconventional family one can imagine with their ambiguity of what is good and what is bad. The conundrum of a 'conventionally good mother' deepens when we attempt to reason with why the characters act as they do. Morrison compels the readers to rethink the definition of a quintessential 'good mother.'

In *Sula*, we are introduced to the biggest matriarch of the 'Bottom', Eva Peace. (The Bottom was the name given to the land above the hills, infertile and useless that was predominantly populated by the blacks of Medallion Ohio.) Eva Peace is portrayed in the most unusual of ways one can think of while describing a mother. Morrison makes her the mother who sacrifices a leg to procure insurance money to feed her children. Eva Peace rebuilds herself from a weak mother unable to do anything for the well-being of her child to a position of power where she chooses to end his suffering. Eva has three children, Hannah, Pearl, and Plum, one of whom she chooses to let go of. She succumbs to *"..burning him to death to prevent his continued life of drug addiction.."* as her son never really came back home from the War. Instead, it was a sick, heroin-addicted boy that stayed with Eva all those years. She could neither bear with the quality of life of her beloved son nor could she bring him back from the gateways of death like she did when he was but an infant.

A victim of her circumstances, Eva was burdened with the vulnerabilities of racism and poverty that made her unable to either provide tenderness or express anything remotely resembling it to her daughters and son. Eva denotes fierce and tough motherhood in her own angry and violent tone. When Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved, she replies, “*what you talkin’ ‘bout did I ever love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?*” She had to pick her battles; with a husband that ran away and the duty to raise her children, she chooses to cut off her leg and fight for the survival of her children which is a love of a kind. The disheartening consequence was that she was left with little time to coddle or articulate her feelings to the little ones.

Morrison’s depiction of her mothers showcases the complicated and unromanticized side of motherhood which owed no similitude to the plethora of feminist literature, or fiction literature, that has existed. As Mary Helen Washington puts it, “A motherhood complicated and threatened by racism is a special kind of motherhood.”

## ***Of Desertion & Abandonment: A Commentary on Racial Vilification***

All mother-child relationships across Morrison’s novels bear the consequences of slavery and racism. In *Beloved*, the protagonist’s (Sethe) willingness to kill her child is accredited to the “*effort to love*” in a ruthless system of oppression. Physical abandonment is a commonality in a world that is distorted by slavery. In *A Mercy*, Florens’s abandonment by her mother is an underlying question that pricks the reader as well as Florens through the course of the book. There is resentment, detestation, skepticism, and betrayal manifested in Florens towards her unnamed mother. She imagines and labels her to be a selfish woman who chose her own and her

son's freedom over her daughter's. This becomes evident when Florens at one point says that she was more comfortable sleeping with Lina than her mother though the physical conditions were worse there. However, it is only towards the end that we become aware of her mother's real intentions. Florens's *mãe* had sold her off, given her away instead of herself because she knew that Jacob saw her as a 'human child'. In a moment of reverie, she knew Florens would have a better life away from her, away from that place where they were merely *negritas* who were raped by white men in the name of 'breaking them in'. She says, that "*to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal*"

In *Beloved*, Sethe's horrific act of infanticide reveals the pernicious effect of the tyranny and oppression that makes her choose death over a lifeless life. Sethe's act is appalling because she decides to murder the very child she loves, to save it. This chilling and cold scene from *Beloved* could be compared to the flipside of a similar atrocity in *A Mercy* where Florens' mother who was also raped by white plantation owners, embraces and loves Florens and her brother that were a result of that rape and in *Sula* where Eva says, "*I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man*" as he never came home from the wretched War.

Survival in the face of abandonment marked this mother-daughter relationship, where the mother made the sacrifice of her freedom, sent her daughter away in hopes of her having a better future. Whereas the daughter remained oblivious to this sacrifice under the shadows of the belief that her mother had abandoned her for the sake of her survival. Survival as a recurring theme also reiterated through the mother-daughter pair of Widow Ealing and Jane. It was quintessential survival in the face of all atrocities that Widow Ealing inflicts lashes on Jane's legs, so she would bleed. She saw it as the only means to disapprove her child's association with Satan, for Satan



does not bleed. This greed for survival is what connects these two pairs, one bears the burden of physically hurting her daughter, the other of desertion. Whereas, in *Beloved*, slavery makes murder the sole means through which Sethe can ensure that her daughter does not experience the sexual violence that would have visited her had she grown up at Sweet Home. A sacrifice these crestfallen mothers must make, bashed by their predicaments, as Sethe declares “*if I hadn’t killed [Beloved] she would have died*” and Florens’ mother knows that “*there is no protection*” for her daughter unless she sacrifices her. A reaffirmation of motherly love; Morrison asserts a rather unsung ‘tough love’ that does not take place in common literature.

## ***Of Survival & Loss: The Notion of ‘Mother Hunger’***

Morrison rebukes the status quo and run-of-the-mill motherly standards and writes fearlessly on concepts that have been seldom evaded and diverted by her contemporaries. In *Sula*, Helene Wright’s mother was a prostitute, and Helene, ever since, became the mother who constantly asked her daughter, Nel to behave in certain ways to extract any speck of her grandmother’s ‘personality’ she might have inherited. Morrison explains, “*Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until [Helene] drove her daughter’s imagination underground*”. The efforts of Helene Wright might not dictate the traditional maternal qualities, but for Morrison, she portrayed the will to sacrifice creativity and individuality to attain acceptance from society and the while people who look down upon them.

Much of the action in Morrison’s books occurs due to her simple disregard of the conventional understanding that biological mothers are the sole domain holders of motherhood. In *A Mercy*, Lina had experienced both

deliverance and destruction at her own hands but had not experienced motherhood herself. So, when Florens arrives, Lina perceives Florens as the child she never bore. An orphan that represents her past and whom she wants to nurture and nourish. A sense of belonging came along with Florens, she was hers, a child to fill the void made by her own destroyed childhood and destitute present. After the death of Patricia (Rebekka's five-year-old daughter), Florens's arrival was not welcomed by either Rebekka or Sorrow. Rebekka initially saw her as a symbol or a mockery of her own failed motherhood. But she soon became the glue that kept them together. This affinity between Lina and Florens owes itself to their mutual quest for 'mother hunger'. Florens is so agonized by her own mother's rejection that she feeds on Lina's love. Lina is so driven by this force of unrequited emotion that it propels her to kill Sorrow's firstborn, drowning it in the river. It is a stagnant contradiction to the conventional image associated with mother, bearer of life, and not death. Violence, hence, becomes a tool that these women don across all of Morrison's works, be it, Lina, in *A Mercy*, Sethe in *Beloved*, and Eva in *Sula*.

Another such unconventional mother is Sorrow in *A Mercy*. Sorrow is a character who is shipwrecked and lost. Lost to the ways of the world and people. She had been accepted by Jacob rather than being bought. A sore in Lina's eyes she labeled her as an outcast, bad luck and at one occasion even blamed her for Rebekka's miscarriages. Isolation draped her even amongst this cluster of misfits. Her inadequacy to perform household chores and farm work did her no good either. By the time she had arrived the two resident women had already united in dismay. A union of childless mothers yearning for love, that had no place for her. However, it can also be attributed to her indifference towards motherhood, void of any desire to be a mother, or to be mothered. This deems her to be an outcast in the coalition of women who are attached

through this unending mother hunger, which Sorrow is devoid of. Nonetheless, motherhood breathes life into Sorrow, so much so that she renames herself Complete. It gives her a purpose. After losing her first child she is cautious of letting Lina be the midwife, dubious of her intent she fears Lina would kill her baby. The child changed her for better- a positive alteration. A rekindling of survival instinct makes her want to live for her baby girl. Her baby comes before anything, she does not let anyone help her because she needs to trust herself again, just like she did before she had been dumped in this unforgiving foreign land. As Lina describes her “*Sorrow is a mother. Nothing more nothing less.*”

Morrison’s oeuvre takes up the issue of maternal love and seeks to fathom its destructive potential in various forms. The sole abstraction of motherhood revolves around, ‘*to be one or to have one*’. Characters like Lina, Rebekka, Hannah, Helene, Eva, and Sorrow struggle to be one in their unique ways. The struggle of ‘to have one’ plagues all her characters, the mere absence of a mother is not the only defining characteristic of abandonment. Some mothers deprive their children of maternal love even when they are present all along. This desire to have one or to be one is termed as ‘Mother Hunger’ by Morrison. Lina, in *A Mercy*, tags them all as orphans, “*and like all orphans they were insatiable.*”

Florens is haunted by this ghost of *minha mae* (my mother). This might be a manifestation of her mother. The absence of her mother in her life deprives her of motherly instinct. She is so diagnosed with this mother hunger that her incompetence as a mother is depicted through her time with Maliak (the blacksmith’s child). She confesses at one point that “*mothers nursing greedy babies scare me.*” Her childhood was plagued with her mother’s absence, it was a consequence of this that she failed to don the role of a motherly figure with Maliak. He represents her brother in her eyes. The brother who her

mother chose over her, hence she is inflected by a distemper that contaminates her internally forever.

In *Sula*, all the daughters had seen their mothers provide, procure, and prepare for their physical well being but there was no emotional manifestation of their actions. The young girls, ever since their emotional and physical proximity, had indulged in overt actions. Morrison teases this proximity with the lines, “*Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers, they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for.*” In one of the early chapters, we see the protagonist and Nel attempting to tease white teenage boys who bullied their black classmates. It is when Sula pulls out a knife and mutilates her finger to scare off the boys when we see a twisted side to the child’s inner self. Critics say that this display of bravado could be interpreted as an expression of courage against systemic racism and oppression. Instead of standing up and brawling, she chooses to harm herself to send a message that their futile bullying is no match for her audacity and sheer ferocity. The detachment that we observe in the girls is a culmination of the emotional trauma and personal detachment that they repeatedly encounter throughout their young and adult lives. One cannot look at the girls’ actions and not see a reflection of their mothers. Growing up in a household where her mother does not partake in actively raising her, Sula blankets all the possibility of compassion she could ever have developed and instilled a conviction to live an independent and experimental life.

## ***Of Solidarity & Love: Sewing Bittersweet Narratives***

Toni Morrison aces the way she brings the novels to a full circle without losing the emptiness she envisions for its characters. Sula succumbs to early death and Nel is shown

reminiscing the adventurous life they lived as teenagers. Shadrack, who was the first person we are acquainted with, greets the readers adieu with his extraordinary Suicide Parade which, surprisingly, people from the Bottom join in. This was a layered symbolism used by her in pieces which we only put together towards the end of the book. In *A Mercy*, the first chapter implants this tumultuous question in the minds of the readers with regards to Florens's mother's action but this is not answered till the very last chapter where the mother addresses the incident in the first person. The narrative in between fabricates a story of an era that poses rhetorical questions in the mind of the readers whilst providing them with a clarity that is needed to understand her mother's decision.

In *Beloved*, Morrison writes, “*Could she have been a loving mother?.. A faithful wife?.. If my mother knew me, would she like me?*” Similarly, when Hannah says that one need not like their kids, Sula's image of her young self drastically changes, transforming her into an agitated and distant teenager who grows up to be an apathetic and cold-natured adult. Thinking about her mother's words ringing over and over in her ears, Sula and Nel approach the river and play with a boy called Chicken Little. While playfully teasing him and swinging him over the waters, he slips and gradually sinks in the cold, and deep river. The girls, not knowing what to do, run away, and the experience of causing a child's murder gravely impacts their friendship which is craftily reiterated by Morrison towards the end of the book.

Throughout the chapters, the readers see Eva burning her son to death, Helena's incessant trials of obliterating any resemblance she bears to her prostitute grandmother, and Hannah's audiences with her secret lovers while Sula walks around the house, making the behavior of the girls intergenerational and matrilineal. Sula ends up mimicking the maternal abandonment she suffers through all the

relationships she forms in her later years. The blanket that once comforted her, makes her want to stand still and look at her mother burn to death and enables her to put her grandmother to a nursing home. Regardless of what the people at the Bottom think of her, she goes on to live a life on her terms and does not put up with any conventions that dare to exist. On her deathbed, we hear Sula assert, “*Being good matters, Nel, but only to you. Not to anybody else. Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don’t get anything for it.*”

In *A Mercy*, Rebekka’s relationship with her mother was plagued by the devotion of religion. Her faith for God swallowed her love, if there was any, for her children. Ironical is the way she blamed religion and God for her mother’s disinterest and detachment and also for the death of her infants, yet she returned to it at the end like a lost pilgrim hoping to find answers and wash her sins in lost lands she did not believe in. Rebekka’s yearning for children and her despise for religion stems from her own parent’s inability to love her and choosing religion over her.

Toni Morrison is gifted in the way she weaves a fable about a juxtaposed reality that unfolds as we turn the pages. In *A Mercy*, she puts the institution of slavery in a world where racism does not exist. There are Black slaves, European slaves, and Native American slaves. A blacksmith who is an independent Black man lives life and a White man, Jacob who does not believe in “*trading in flesh*”. Lina and Rebekka with their childlessness are juxtaposed with Sorrow who is pregnant. Similarly, in *Sula*, she sews a narrative action between conformity represented by Nel and experiment embodied by the spirit of Sula side by side the eccentric resident of the Bottom, Shadrack. While Shadrack introduces himself as an agent of chaos and Nel is an evil that haunts the Bottom, Helene Wright illustrates the inconveniences caused by excess conformity. She tries to suggest that much order

breeds repression as it smothers the scope of creativity. She places her characters ever so dramatically opposed that the beauty of antithetical attraction seeps through every single chapter of the book. Even the white town of Medallion is juxtaposed to the Bottom. The stories of the Wright and the Peace families are interwoven so convincingly that it is hard to miss the piercing contrast. The narrative does not merely tiptoe around but is largely focused on the binary dichotomies of its characters with prolonged entanglements that make the books aesthetically effective.

Another significant facet in the novels was the recurring emphasis on solidarity among the mothers. The 'Mother Hunger' in *A Mercy* highlights the virtue of solidarity through the blossoming relationship of Lina and Rebekka, two women deprived of a child's love. One is barren, the other stranded by her children as death keeps on taking them away. They belong to different backgrounds and different classes yet they inhibit solidarity that surpasses all tangible and inanimate barriers curated by society. They become friends in similar pursuits on the same journey, just taking separate paths. The pair form a mute alliance in figuring out the world they are both new to. Patricia, Rebekka's dead daughter, symbolizes their collective motherhood; an agony that they shared. This accord of comradeship rooted in the sorrow of the short-lived infants Lina delivered and buried every subsequent year is much more intense than their status divide. Even in times of Rebekka's sickness, one was struck by the plague and the other by the anguish of a sheltered child, Lina was the only person Rebekka trusted and whose judgment she trusted. In *Sula*, Eva leaves her little kids to Mrs. Suggs, a familial neighbor and she goes off for days in search of a lifeline.

## Conclusion

Beyond the vulnerable and tumultuous storms, they go through, these strong and determined females remain the heroes of their stories. They take away the power from the hands of their oppressors, metaphoric and literal, and give us hauntingly forceful narratives. The transformation and development of each character, irrespective of their tragic or happy futures, provides a fresh perspective on motherhood, friendship, solidarity, and community. As Sara Ruddick states in her essay, *“What we are pleased to call “mother-love” is intermixed with hate, sorrow, impatience, resentment, and despair; thought-provoking ambivalence is a hall-mark of mothering.”*

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