



## **A Critical Reading Of Black Motherhood In Toni Morrison's A Mercy**

**Dr. M. Angkayarkan Vinayakaselvi<sup>a</sup>, K. Arunmozhi<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>Associate Professor of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620 024. Email id: [avs@bdu.ac.in](mailto:avs@bdu.ac.in)

<sup>b</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli- 620 024. Email id: [arunmozhikrishnan@gmail.com](mailto:arunmozhikrishnan@gmail.com)

### **APA Citation:**

Vinayakaselvi, M.A., Arunmozhi, K., (2020). A Critical Reading Of Black Motherhood In Toni Morrison's A Mercy. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 16(2), 1157-1161.

Submission Date: 11/04/2020

Acceptance Date: 21/05/2020

---

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to represent how motherhood has autonomy when it is seen detached from patriarchal construct. Motherhood plays an important role in women's life. It gives women a sense of purpose and responsibility. In Morrison's view motherhood seems to be an act of resistance, essential and integral to black women's fight against racism, sexism and their ability to achieve wellbeing for themselves and their culture. Morrison points that motherhood deteriorates women. Through *A Mercy*, Morrison represents the experiences of women who are complete as mother. Linda Wagner – Martin argues that Morrison's fictions varies in drawing the role of mothers, as well as the outcomes of that mothering in the equally varied characters of children, provide necessary critical information. Patriarchy does not treat black and white motherhood identically. The image of black mother is always diverged and contradictory. Hence the patriarchal society affects the purity of black motherhood and projects them as an object of sexuality.

**Keywords:** Motherhood; Black Women; Patriarchy; slavery

---

## **1. Introduction**

Toni Morrison, an American writer well known for her works on Black experiences. She is the first African American women writer to win Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. She is one of the prominent women writers to represent the concept of motherhood, especially the lives of black mothers. Also she narrates the pain and suffering of African Slaves. The difficulty in upbringing black children by the black mother is seen in the works of Toni Morrison. *A Mercy* is the ninth novel written by her. The novel is set during the slavery period and focuses mainly on the concept of motherhood.

The story of Minha Mae, a slave mother, is told in *A Mercy*. She works for businessman and slave owner from Portugal named D'Ortega. A boy and a daughter are born to Minha Mae. The name of the daughter is Florens. Around Florens, the story revolves. D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner who owes money to Jacob, a businessman, first owns Florens and her mother, Minha Mae. Jacob is asked to accept a slave as payment when he visits D'Ortega's plantation to get his money. Because he feels that slaves are not possessions, Jacob is apprehensive. The story states that "Flesh was not his commodity" (Morrison 21). Jacob complies with D'Ortega's repeated instructions and turns to face the slaves. After looking through a group of more than twenty slaves, Jacob settles on Minha Mae, a woman with a son and a daughter. To his surprise, she gives Florens, her daughter, and implores, "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take my child.

Not me" (Morrison 26). The constricting contradictions that were placed on black moms under slavery are reflected in Minha Mae's experience. In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis argues that Morrison's books "problematize the mother, rather than romanticize her" (145) with regard to the situation of black mothers in American culture. According to Davis, Morrison's narratives reveal the settings and problems that black women encounter in a racist culture. They are frequently complicated by inescapable circumstances, like in the instance of Minha Mae, who asks a slave owner to abduct her daughter.

When a mother is forced to drive her daughter towards a lesser degree of evil, maternal love and how it is expressed will be difficult to understand. Jacob is shocked when the mother offers to have her own daughter taken away. He is unable to comprehend the true worry, which results from a mother's fear and powerlessness. He quickly accepts the offer since he believes the girl to be an "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away" (Morrison 34). Jacob agrees to the mother's suggestion because he thinks Florens will help to alleviate Rebekka's loneliness. In this way, Florens joins Lina and Sorrow and remains in Jacob's home as a servant.

Morrison uses Minha Mae's decision to give her daughter to a merchant, Jacob, to illustrate how difficult it is to comprehend maternal love. Because she is aware that there is "no protection" (161) for slaves, especially female ones whose bodies belong to the masters, and wants to shield her daughter Florens from "the lips of an old married couple" (Morrison 160), she asks Jacob to take Florens. Harriet Anna Jacobs makes the following claim in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (86). Because Minha Mae is well aware of the dehumanizing effects of hopeless servitude, she pushes her daughter into a lower degree of evil in an effort to protect her from greater oppression and sexual harassment. They implicitly display their unspoken connection.

The story emphasizes the advantages of being a mother. It displays a novel aspect of mother-child relationships that cannot be described by conventional ideas or practices. In *Feminism for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, Bell Hooks makes the case that marginality, a place of deprivation, can also be a place of resistance. "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, even clings to, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist," (150). Black women's marginalization, which prevents them from obtaining their rights, is revealed by hooks. This is also a sign of resistance because it encourages black women's ability for resistance. Black women, like Minha Mae, reject the controlling behaviors by loving their children and claiming their natural rights as mothers in an effort to confront and deny their victimized and marginalized position.

To her daughter, Minha Mae explains why she is worried about her. She is assured in the validity of her arguments. She believes that if she candidly discusses the potentially terrible repercussions of Florens staying with her mother, Florens will be persuaded. She justifies her choice by telling her that as she was standing there in those shoes, the tall man chuckled and said he would take her to pay off the loan.

*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. (Morrison 166-7)*

The disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter is perhaps the greatest horror of slavery (Rigney 68). Minha Mae expresses her parental worry to Florens through her daughter. She asks Jacob Vaark to take Florens away from D'Ortega's property in order to protect her from being sexually abused because she views Jacob as a kind employer who is compassionate toward his employees. Florens is someone Minhamae wants to keep to herself. But when she notices the master's desire for her daughter in his eyes, she becomes concerned about Florens' safety. She does not want her daughter to experience the hardships of slavery and live a life of dependence as she did. She explains,

"I thought there was one chance. There is a difference, but there is no protection (166). Minha Mae views Jacob as Florens' sole option to get away from D'Ortega.

She works to ensure a brighter future for her daughter Florens as a responsible mother. She goes through the struggle that many slave mothers go through. Hooks writes, "In the midst of a brutal racist system, which did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist the system" (144) in response to the brutality of racist society toward Black people. Hooks contends that the brutally racist system devalues black people. A black woman has an obligation to respect her children's life. *The Narrative of Fredrick Douglass*, a work of autobiography by Frederick Douglass, is a good example of this concept. Douglass describes his own mother, stating that she would frequently go twelve kilometers at night to give her son a single hug. It also appears to be true in this instance because Florens' mother Minha Mae goes above all predetermined limits to give her daughter a less dehumanized life. She rejects playing the vulnerable mother. She makes every effort to protect her daughter from enslavement and tyranny.

Morrison describes and situates motherhood as a locus of power in this novel. According to Andrea O'Reilly 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). According to O'Reilly, black women's experiences and viewpoints on motherhood reflect a distinctive maternal identity. Additionally, the duties they play diverge from those that mothers are expected to fulfill in the mainstream culture. Her justification clarifies Minha Mae's strategy for dealing with the issue and validates her position as a mother. In order to put her daughter in the care of another slave owner who she believes will treat her more humanely, she sacrifices the maternal ties. By altering and rearticulating the natural power of black women, Morrison's perspective on parenting empowers black women to adhere to harmful ideals of femininity.

Minha Mae is portrayed as the ideal mother in *A Mercy* because she decides to put herself between her daughter and a better life. She asks Jacob to accept her daughter instead of money because she is an experienced woman who can discern Jacob's mentality. Florens harbors this secret, which she subsequently shares and expresses through her interactions with rivals. When Florens is given to Jacob in exchange for cash, she is roughly eight years old. She recalls with pure sadness and finds it difficult to comprehend her mother's decision to not offer the son as a slave. As she narrates:

*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 minahmae 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. (Morrison 8)*

Florens witnesses everything but finds nothing to make sense of when Minha Mae asks Jacob Vaark to accept her daughter. Because she wishes to keep her safe from her cruel owner, Minha Mae requests him to take away her daughter rather than her son. According to Florens' mother, "it was not a miracle- It was a mercy" (Morrison 167). For an eight-year-old girl like Florens, it is quite challenging to comprehend her mother's act of mercy.

In a lavish residence, Morrison's account of D'Ortega's possessions exposes the horrors and dread of slavery. A sizable farmhouse owned by D'Ortega is used to successfully deal in slaves. D'Ortega never passes up the chance to provide slaves. The remaining slaves face challenging lives. Florens remembers her time growing up on the terrible tobacco farm of D'Ortega. In her account of her time there, Minha Mae says she spent her days "picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds" and her "nights on the floor of the cookhouse" with her mother. Florens claims that conditions at D'Ortega's plantation were appalling.

An oppressed group's experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult" (Rollins 26) a black female standpoint is thus, in Rollins' words, "an independent, viable, yet subjugated knowledge" (Rollins 13). Florens' suffering and feelings are amply depicted in the novel. She is still a young girl and just understands her mother's choices. She says, "Mothers nursing greedy babies scare me" (Morrison 8) to describe how she feels. I am aware of how their faces change when they decide to select holding the young boy's hand. Later in life, Florens finds it challenging to build positive relationships with people because she is preoccupied with what her mother offers her rather than what her brother does.

Minha Mae clarifies the fact behind offering her daughter to Jacob Vaark when she says to her that the act she has done out of her maternal love is aiming to protect her from the eyes and lust of D'Ortega and his sons. She claims that: "Breasts provide pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming too irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see" (Morrison 189). The mother's compassion for her daughter is evident in all of this. "Woman did not simply give birth; she made it possible for the child to go on living," says Adrienne Rich in "Of Women Born" to illustrate a mother's concern for her children. The child's first source of nutrition was from her breasts, but she moved beyond this one-to-one bond out of care for the child"(101). Rich contends that in addition to giving birth to life, women also serve as its defenders. The mother is aware that Florens and other slaves are buried on D'Ortega's farm. They are treated humanely and raised as sisters at Jacob's farm, where they are also under his watchful eye. There are other slaves as well as Florens who reside there at Jacob Vaark's mercy.

Florens feels the lack of support as a result of growing up without her mother's affection. Her thoughts vacillate between the present and the past. Her mother's recollections are concentrated in the past, but she has no place in the present. She occasionally acts in an unorthodox manner. She finds it difficult to handle the hurt of her mother giving her to Jacob. Florens enjoys being loved and wants to love. It cannot be satisfied by her relationship with Lina and Sorrow, the other slaves at Jacob's house. She also grows closer to the blacksmith, but they do not become intimate. She views Jacob's home as a safe sanctuary that guards her against physical and verbal violence. At Jacob's house, little Florens attempts to live up to everyone's expectations out of fear that they will reject her like her mother did. She finds it challenging to comprehend her mother's intense love and commitment to her as she offers her to Jacob Vaark in an effort to protect her from sex abuse and violence.

As a woman who was subjected to sexual assault by her master, Florens' mother, Minhamae is aware that enslaved women are without any protection. "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal," the story says. Even if scars appear, the infection is always going on below" (193). She decides to give Jacob Vaark her child after learning that he views Florens "as a human child" (195) because there "was no animal" in his heart (191). Florens is unable to comprehend her mother's intense love for her and never views their separation as a mercy. Her entire existence is tormented by the pain of desertion.

The story of an abandoned infant and a helpless mother is spun in the novel to investigate the identity of the black slave mother in America. It is meant to speak for the suffering mothers who have been denied a voice throughout history. The events in *A Mercy* take place before racism was recognized as a legal justification for slavery. As Morrison puts it, it is the time before black and slavery became married. Morrison eloquently explains how prejudice against Black women stems from their race, culture, and gender. The idea of the Black mother's delight and suffering is at the heart of the book.

*A Mercy* emphasizes the benefits of motherhood, despite the fact that they are not entirely altruistic and helpful. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davies asserts 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) is required in order to reframe the ideas of motherhood. In order to make parenthood an empowering experience, Davies highlights the distinctions between women's determined patterns of mothering and patriarchal ideas of motherhood. According to this

perspective, the institution of motherhood is freed from patriarchal ideas of motherhood that place women in a fixed position. The stereotypical conception of a woman as a mother is dismantled in this book.

## 2. Conclusion

Morrison's *A Mercy* deconstructs the traditional image of woman as mother from the patriarchal conceptions of motherhood. The mothering pattern of women represents the boundary put by the patriarchal society as a hindrance for empowerment of mothers. Morrison's novel deconstructs the traditional image of woman as mother from the patriarchal conceptions of motherhood. The mothering pattern of women represents the boundary put by the patriarchal society as a hindrance for motherhood empowerment. African Canadian theorists Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard's definition of empowerment: "empowerment is naming, analysing, and challenging oppression on an individual, collective and/or structural level. Empowerment, which occurs through the development of critical consciousness, is gaining control, exercising choices, and engaging in collective social action" (Bernard, et al. 46).

## References

- Bernard, Candace, et. al. "She Who Learns Teaches: Othermothering in the Academy." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*. 2.2 (2000): 66-84.
- Christie, Agatha. *The Hound of Death*. HarperCollins UK, 2003.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. Vintage Books, 1983.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Routledge, 2014.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: A Slavery Narrative*. 2013.
- Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. Random House, 2010.
- Jenkins, Nina. "Black women and the meaning of Motherhood." *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Patterns and Identities*. Ed. Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly. Toronto: Second Story, 1998.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. "Hagar's Mirror: Self and Identity in Morrison's Fiction." *Toni Morrison*. Ed. Linden Peach. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.
- Rollins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Toni Morrison and the Maternal: From the Bluest Eye to God Help the Child*. Peter Lang, International Academic Publishers, 2019.