

Abstract

This thesis argues that motherhood as depicted in Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy* is a site of female empowerment. Its emancipating potential is set against the context of slavery and patriarchy found in the narratives and shows how mothers are able to resist oppressive structures and secure their children's well-being. Slavery practices severed family ties and caused its dismemberment by separating parents from their children. In the novels under study the recovery of those ties happens in an imaginative re-writing of history. Mother figures, such as *Beloved's* Sethe, come to terms with the re-embodiment of a painful familial past and deal with its traumatizing effects to be able to renounce it and move on. Others like *Song of Solomon's* Pilate cling to their past and act as mediators between the community's history and its descendants. A re-writing of history is urgent for African American writers and peoples who share slavery pasts, and who thus need to deal with their lasting legacies in the present.

Motherhood is thus identified in several recurring patterns. Toni Morrison describes physical aspects of mothering from the point of view of the mother and uses the female body as a life-giving source that cancels the objectification of female slave bodies. Additionally, she advocates a motherhood that is offered to children other than one's own, in accordance with the African tradition of other-mothering. She also emphasizes the role of the woman who offers valuable knowledge and spiritual nurturance to members of her community with the aim to help them cope with adversary economic and social conditions.

Toni Morrison supports a multifarious representation of motherhood through the various mothers that inhabit her texts. In doing so, her novels delineate a world of a prevalent female nature that is powerful, creative and compassionate, and yet at times, overwhelming. Focusing on the female capacity to mother opens up a female narrative space that is characterized by self-sufficiency and regeneration. Thus, lived female experiences define women characters and create a parallel space that renders imposed, external definitions of female nature ineffective. Feminine nature is then seen to be a source of openness and prolificacy and is paralleled to the multi-cultural space of the Caribbean. The Caribbean is insightfully symbolized as a womb for its regenerative qualities that produce new, hybrid cultures. Both postslavery cultures as well as female nature should be seen as sites whose empowering, creative potential has not yet been fully understood or taken advantage of.

Keywords: Morrison, motherhood, empowerment, African American, Caribbean, postslavery, female nature