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**Great Mothers: Female Empowerment in Selected Novels by Toni Morrison**

**Velké matky: ženská síla ve vybraných románech Toni Morrisonové**

**DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE**

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction: The empowering potential of motherhood**

This thesis aims at positioning Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy* within the context of post-plantation literatures in order to trace patterns of female prominence and an emancipating portrayal of motherhood. In the light of the critical writing of New World and Caribbean studies, Morrison's writing will be seen to challenge coercive structures imposed by a system of colonization and slavery. Using feminist writings to delineate its emancipating potential, motherhood set against slavery and post-slavery cultures will be seen both as a necessity and as a site of empowerment and resistance, on the one hand, or, on the other, as the locus where the violence of patriarchal and plantation authority is made more evident. Morrison also points towards an understanding of motherhood that is opposed to social imperatives of white society which reduce women's role to either reproductive units, or to wives of men; it is motherhood that enables women to realize their importance and to find fulfillment.

Motherhood is a core theme in Morrison's fiction. The novels under study were chosen in order to analyze motherhood in contexts of pre-racial slavery in the case of *A Mercy*, institutionalized African-American slavery in *Beloved*, and post-slavery times in *Song of Solomon*. Motherhood is identified against a slavery past/ present which accounts for its powerful and yet at times, cruel representation in the novels, as well as for its role in identity formation and the preservation of community. Except for motherhood experienced against coercive social structures, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy* were chosen because of the particular treatment of their female characters and their prominent attention to the experience of motherhood.

Pilate's depiction in *Song of Solomon* (1977) as a 'self-generated' mother whose biological family consists of a line of female characters, her completeness and self-identification make her a character of unique posture. She is juxtaposed with Ruth's subservience and vulnerability to show how submission to patriarchal laws renders women weak and suffering. Moreover, Pilate is seen to be characterized by a certain corporeality that allows her to be balanced and self-sufficient, as well as by cultural memory that makes her a guardian and cultural bearer of her community. Pilate's corporeality and her being a biological mother and grandmother do not restrict her mothering to her own offspring; she "other-mothers" Milkman as she is the mediator between him and his ancestors. Other-mothering will be discussed using feminist theories which favor a conception of motherhood that can be practiced even by women who are childless, as a social function and not as a physical one. In this way Morrison affirms the African tradition of other-mothering in which 'surrogate mothers or a community of women mother the child in the event of the mother's death or abandonment, psychological or otherwise. These mothers are also, as with Pilate in *Song*, the singing teachers or story tellers who tell the orphaned or neglected child the stories and provide them with nurturance not made available by the biological mother.'<sup>1</sup>

In *Beloved* (1988) 'Toni Morrison puts into words three orders of experience that Western cultural narratives usually leave out: childbirth and nursing from a mother's perspective; the desires of a preverbal infant; and the sufferings of those destroyed by slavery.'<sup>2</sup> Motherhood in *Beloved* is primarily woven around the mother figure of Sethe whose journey to freedom makes a female slave narrative that celebrates the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004) 34.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *PMLA*, Volume 108, 1993, 474.

emancipatory quality of Sethe's attachment to her children, while it acquires upsetting complexity when Sethe takes Beloved's life. Wyatt argues that 'Sethe extends her rights over her own body—the right to use any means, including death, to protect herself from a return to slavery—to the “parts of her” that are her children, folding them back into the maternal body.'<sup>3</sup> The inevitability of violence in the context of slavery is powerfully depicted when Sethe refuses to leave her children in the hands of the slave masters and claims what she feels is rightfully hers. Morrison wants to portray the inexorable vicious circle of savagery that is initiated by the want to possess human beings and their subsequent treatment as commodities.

Morrison's concentration on the body through her female characters and their maternal experiences is also a means to show language's inadequacy to represent slavery fully. Using the wounded female body, the physical aspects of motherhood and the embodiment of Beloved, she comes closer to the experiences of thousands of people who have experienced slavery and who were deprived of a narrative voice to express their experiences. Slavery is shown to lead to violence as the mother reacts to the possession and abuse of her children's bodies by the slave masters, but it seems that for Beloved the need to claim her mother is equally strong. The special bond between mother and daughter is then portrayed from the mother's as well as the daughter's perspective and shows how the daughter's need to re-unite with her mother also attests to the importance of motherhood. Except for Beloved, Denver's relation to both Sethe and Beloved is also given prominence in the narrative. Through her Sethe is able to 'explain' herself; Rushdy writes 'What, finally, Denver is to Beloved is the

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<sup>3</sup> Wyatt, 476.

space for hearing the tale of infanticide with a degree of understanding'<sup>4</sup>. Lastly, a constant emblematic figure that is favored in all Morrison's novels is the communal mother, represented here with the figure of Baby Suggs who possesses ancient wisdom and is able to live in freedom, sustain a home and tend for the family of her son.

The female characters of *A Mercy* (2008) on the other hand, form a community of women in a 17<sup>th</sup> century household set in wilderness. Morrison chose the time and setting of *A Mercy* to separate race from slavery; Lina, Sorrow, Florens are of different ethnic descent. While at the beginning there is a distinct balance of roles in the household, which consists of a master and mistress and their servants, when Jacob Vaark dies the women are forced into different roles as their survival depends on other-mothering and co-operation. Lina, Sorrow, Florens and their mistress Rebecca are depicted in terms of their status as mothers, daughters, other-mothers or would-be mothers and thus, form a multi-cultural and variedly relational family that lacks men, and so, a central authoritarian figure. The absence of men shows the primacy of the women characters and the subsequent difficulty to survive in a threatening world that is governed by sustaining patriarchal laws.

Morrison 'pointedly critiques the devastating and malign effects of patriarchal supremacy on the lives of the female characters of the novel that compel them to sexist notions of inferiority and submissiveness.'<sup>5</sup> Yet in treating Florens' connection to her mother who remains with her as a guiding voice throughout the novel, in seeing Sorrow acquire identity and posture by becoming a mother, and in addition, by

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<sup>4</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *American Literature*, Volume 64, 1992, 586.

<sup>5</sup> Mar Gallego-Durán, "Nobody Teaches You to Be a Woman: Female Identity, Community and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," in Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally, ed. *Toni Morrison's A Mercy: Critical Approaches* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 104.



depicting Lina as a woman whose instincts and cultural knowledge substitute maternal status and sustain life in the Vaark household, Morrison shows that although women's position is frail and survival doubtful, there is a space within female and maternal subjectivity which should be taken advantage of. When it remains unexplored it accounts for women being deprived of their soundness and efficacy.

All in all, motherhood is a prevalent concern in Morrison's fiction and essentially portrayed within conditions of slavery, patriarchy, oppression. We can detect several recurring patterns in the way motherhood is presented in the novels under study, namely the physical experience of pregnancy, labor, and nursing of emancipated mothers such as Sethe or Sorrow, figures of other-mothering and cultural bearing such as Pilate and Baby Suggs, and figures of daughters requisite to find guidance, support, rootedness and self-identification through their mothers, such as Denver, Beloved, and Florens. Yet, differences among representations of women in relation to motherhood in the novels show the direct correspondence of motherhood and oppressive social structures.

Starting with *Song of Solomon* which is set in the 1930's, going back to 1873 in *Beloved* and further back to 1682 in *A Mercy*, women's experiences of motherhood seem to be in accordance with their social situation. That is, Pilate is able to live as an outlaw and fend for her extended family at a time after abolition and is depicted as an essentially non-violent mother figure, whereas Sethe commits infanticide as the outcome of a first-hand experience of slavery. Within a regime of complete and outmost abuse, she cannot choose a less violent act. Last, *A Mercy* women are disoriented and head on centrifugally because of their vulnerable status outside society and away from their roots. Thus the experience of motherhood in *A Mercy*, as portrayed in bits and pieces and jointly from all of them, is felt almost as a spark of

empowerment in the vastness of their isolation. Their fulfillment comes by way of a maternal or filial consciousness, but does not have the dynamics needed to be realized outside themselves as it does not have a cultural, communal foundation.

## CHAPTER 2 Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Post-slavery literatures: The Caribbean Womb

Motherhood and its liberating and emancipating potential will be discussed within the framework of postslavery literatures. That is, motherhood as analyzed here, is essentially set against slavery tactics. Women's emancipation through motherhood is a necessity under circumstances of oppression. Toni Morrison's fiction deals with topics found in literatures of the Caribbean and the Plantation South, such as family structures, the importance of women, the oral collective voice and cross-cultural meetings. In addition, those literatures share an undeniable cultural heritage of African descent, which is especially important in the experience and representation of motherhood in Morrison's novels. For that reason, the theoretical texts to be used in the analysis of her work will include New World studies texts, such as *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* by George B. Handley, and *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* by Valérie Loichot.

Treating Morrison as a writer of the wider Caribbean area, opens up possibilities to discuss her novels with the use of Caribbean theoretical writings such as the French-Caribbean writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant, or the Cuban writer and critical essayist Antonio Benitez-Rojo who use a poetic, feminized view of the Caribbean which shares a lot with the representation of female subjectivity and motherhood in the novels. Loichot, who has used Glissant among others in her analysis, points out that using 'theoretical tools developed within the context of the African Diaspora (...)

inverts the trend of interpreting minority literatures through Western theories.<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of the Caribbean, as well as the trope of motherhood, are primarily used as sites of resistance and affirmation to life, and are set against the violence of the plantation.

The Caribbean, as well as the US South, is a term often used not to designate a clearly defined geographical area, but to create a metaphor of a place where repeated patterns of oppression exist as the result of a past of slavery. Using a metaphor as a research method is already in accordance with a mode of thinking that resists strict signification, and so, resists subjugation to a dominant cultural ideology. Benitez-Rojo for example, in trying to define Caribbean culture, used the image of two black old women walking down the street ‘in a certain kind of way.’<sup>7</sup> This ‘certain kind of way’ is in turn difficult to determine. Cultural processes in the Caribbean follow, according to Rojo, ancient rhythms and improvisation; in other words, the more difficult it is to define, the more a certain way of walking is shown to resist practices of domination. He explains that, ‘the only good thing that walking, dancing, playing an instrument, singing, or writing “in a certain kind of way” are good for is to displace the participants toward a poetic territory marked by an aesthetic of pleasure, or better, an aesthetic whose desire is nonviolence.’<sup>8</sup> Thus, the image of the two women is used to point towards both the feminine quality of Caribbean cultures, as well as its potential to resist oppressive structures.

The parallel between the Caribbean qualities, as analyzed by Glissant and Rojo, with those of female experience allows one to think there is something in female

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<sup>6</sup> Valérie Loichot, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse*, ed. A. James Arnold, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007) 4.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham and London; Duke University Press, 1996) 10.

<sup>8</sup> Benítez-Rojo. 21.

experience that in contrast to its vulnerable, underprivileged social role, can be turned into a paradigm of multiplicity, sharing, interchange and openness. European culture has been an aggressor of both human bodies and culture in the Americas and the Caribbean. Benitez-Rojo writes that ‘Europe (...) conceived the project of inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa.’<sup>9</sup> Thus, motherhood treated in slavery and post-slavery contexts can be used both for its corporeal experience, as well as for its functional role as the bond between the children and their cultural past. Morrison’s focus on female characters creates literature which, by exposing the female experience, opens up a female textual consciousness, and makes use of its sensuality and rhythms, its force, its capacity to nurture. In addition, motherhood and female corporeality are used as tropes by which history can be re-written and imposed structures can be challenged. Without restricting female identity to those qualities, Morrison shows that they constitute an inherent woman’s potential to resist violence, favor life, and ensure survival and empowerment for her children.

## **2.2 Family Narratives against the Violence of the Plantation**

The connection of Morrison with writers of Caribbean descent to discuss slavery representation and family history has been first made by Handley. According to him, ‘postslavery literature (...) moves us away from a fixation on the more formal manifestations of slavery and into the more complex social relations before and after its legal abolition.’<sup>10</sup> He argues that ‘family history is the thematic and structural sine-qua-non of postslavery narrative. Writing about family history allows the authors to

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<sup>9</sup> Benítez-Rojo, 5.

<sup>10</sup> George B. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 3.

revise the metaphorical meanings of genealogy that have been assumed by the plantocracy and by emergent nationalists and that have contributed to a consolidation of their landowning social power (...) Genealogy also enables the reconstruction of family ties that were ravaged by the whims of slave owners.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Morrison proves to be offering an insightful representation of plantation tactics, and their impact on the lives of the slave family, most notably to its female members by showing the family histories of her protagonists. The family trope is then used with special focus on the women characters. The depiction of mothers, daughters, grandmothers and aunts, either biological or surrogate ones, does not only enhance our understanding of slavery structures, but also offers portraits of women who can transcend their situation and points towards a gendered rewriting of history.

Valerie Loichot uses the term ‘orphan narrative’ to describe postslavery literature. For her, kinship ties and the passing on of stories are modes which ensure the reconstruction of the family by the narratives of orphaned members of the slave family. Morrison creates orphaned characters like Pilate in *Song of Solomon*; characters who manage to unite with their lost family and survive in societies of post-plantation economies by reaching back into their family’s past. Nevertheless, she does not point towards an idealization or overstatement. Pilate’s daughter and granddaughter, for instance, are not able to reach a state of being that is similar to hers; they are dependent on men, and not strong enough to overcome difficulties. Their depiction, as well as the depiction of the society they live in, shows how human relations are always in a process, and that oppositional forces within a culture are constantly at play, without ever achieving stability.

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<sup>11</sup> Handley, 3.

### 2.3 Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood

Motherhood as a site of power for women as seen in Morrison will be discussed further with the use of feminist works by Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Grosz. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich claims that our knowledge of motherhood, of its nature and meaning comes from men, as they are ‘the sayers and makers of our culture.’<sup>12</sup> Morrison on the contrary writes about child-birth, pregnancy, nursing, even infanticide, as experienced by mothers themselves. Rich speaks of motherhood as having a potential that has not yet been fully realized because of the imposed patriarchal structures of Western culture. She draws examples of cultures of pre-patriarchal historical times to show how there were civilizations ‘in which matrilinearity and matrifocality played a part; in which women were more active and admired participants in all of culture’<sup>13</sup> and so, to argue that a realization of the patriarchal impact on women’s power can lead to a retrieval of the power of women.

Rich makes a distinction among matrilineal, matrilocal, and matriarchal societies. Matrilineal societies are those in which ‘kinship is traced and property transmitted through the mother’s line’, whereas matrilocal are those ‘where the husband moves into the house or village of the wife’s mother.’<sup>14</sup> However, women and children in such societies are still under male authority.<sup>15</sup> Rich uses the definition of matriarchy from Robert Briffault, as a society where ‘female creative power is pervasive, and women have organic authority, rather than one in which the woman establishes and

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<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Ltd, 1977) 11.

<sup>13</sup> Rich, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Rich, 58

<sup>15</sup> Rich, 59.

maintains domination and control over the man.’<sup>16</sup> Mothers in Morrison are not used as symbols of domination over men, nor do they replicate a system of economic authority such as the one they live in. Morrison is very inventive in the way she portrays motherhood as a way for mothers to acquire knowledge and control over their bodies, as with Sorrow and Sethe. As far as their social role is concerned, they manage to establish an authority of magic or wisdom, as with Baby Suggs and Pilate. Either way their emancipation is not threatening, but it is inward without being passive; its goal is to reach a complete self.

It is interesting to note how in discussing motherhood Rich makes a connection to colonization. She argues that ‘each colonized people is defined by its conqueror as weak, feminine, incapable of self-government, ignorant, uncultured, effete, irrational, in need of civilizing’ but also ‘mystical, physical, in deep contact with the earth—all attributes of the primordial Mother.’<sup>17</sup> As a result, the parallels of patriarchal oppression and colonizer oppression are evident and explain the treatment of women characters and their depiction as mothers in Morrison with the use of Caribbean and post-slavery theory. More importantly, both theorists like Glissant, and writers like Morrison, rather than simply rejecting those attributes that are typically considered feminine—women’s physicality, mysticism, nurturing ability—on the basis of their being restrictive, stereotyped definitions of womanhood, instead re-evaluate and interpret them from a new, more empowering perspective.

If one wants to challenge coercive structures of slavery or patriarchy, it is impossible not to speak of motherhood; both men in patriarchal societies, as well as slavemasters, have taken hold of women’s capacity for reproduction to secure their authority. It is

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Briffault, *The Mothers* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1969) 433-35 in Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago Ltd., 1977) 59-60

<sup>17</sup> Rich, 65



the site where oppression is mostly evident; even more so, because it contains a physical aspect that deserves further analysis. Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* develops the idea of a corporeal feminism in which she sees the body ‘a most peculiar “thing”, for it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; (...) Human bodies, indeed all animate bodies, stretch and extend the notion of physicality that dominates the physical sciences, for animate bodies are objects necessarily different from other objects; they are materialities that are uncontainable in physicalist terms alone.’<sup>18</sup>

If we come to understand the body for more than its materiality, then we can avoid the reduction of women’s corporeality as evidence of their supposed inferiority and rather claim that it is what gives them a completeness of self. The female body is given prominence in Morrison, and motherhood is exemplified through its physical aspects, most expressly with Sethe. Wyatt argues that ‘the mother figure, Sethe, defines herself as a maternal body.’<sup>19</sup> The physicality of bodies becomes all the more important in Morrison because of the physical abuse of slaves, as well as their treatment as mere objects, as commodities which belong to the slave master. By pointing towards an undeniably physical experience, such as the maternal, it is moreover possible for us to come closer to the experience of slavery. Language is after all unable to ‘pin down slavery, genocide, war’ as Morrison said in her Nobel speech, but in its effort to do so, it might suggest the prominence of the bodily experience of slavery and so, allows us to imagine it more profoundly.

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) xi

<sup>19</sup> Jean Wyatt, “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” in *PMLA*, Volume 108, 1993, 474.

## 2.4 *Black Feminist Thought on Motherhood*

The representation of motherhood in Morrison is linked to the African tradition in which mothers' primacy secured the survival of the community. Although there are important motherly figures in her fiction who do not share an African heritage, such as Lina, the prominence of black mothers and their empowering images ask for a consideration of the relevant literature on Black motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, argues that 'It is in many ways easier to see the contours of a Black women's standpoint on motherhood in the pre-World War II era.'<sup>20</sup> According to Hill Collins, this is so because this era shares 'specific social conditions associated with slavery, Southern rural life, and class-stratified, racially segregated neighborhoods of earlier periods of urban Black migration.'<sup>21</sup>

The three novels under study are all set before World War II, which allows for their association with the experience of traditional motherhood of African-American communities. Hill Collins argues that despite a certain distinction in some African American communities between bloodmothers and other women who care for children, othermothers such as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins, as well as non-biologically related women of the same community were also responsible for children's upbringing and were considered important in the community.<sup>22</sup> Othermothers and bloodmothers then formed an extended network of kin and fictive kin that was woman-centered; this gave women significant status.

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<sup>20</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) 177.

<sup>21</sup> Hill Collins, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Hill Collins, 177-8.

Last, Hill Collins mentions the existence of such networks in Caribbean and other Black diasporic societies which attests to the importance of mothering for people of African descent.<sup>23</sup> The tradition of othermothering is very important in analyzing motherhood in Morrison, as many of her characters act as othermothers. It is especially important in the figure of Pilate whose experience of motherhood is largely a case of othermothering towards her nephew, Milkman. Their relationship forms the narrative pattern of *Song of Solomon*; their encounters in different times of the story, whether they happen before Milkman is born, or during his lifetime, are signposts of his maturation. The conclusion of the book moreover, is a scene of their coming together, and it is made possible by Pilate's role as his othermother.

In addition, what defines African American mothering is the passing-on of the ancestral memory. O'Reilly writes that 'If black children are to survive they must know the stories, legends, and myths of their ancestors. In African American culture, women are the keepers of the tradition: they are the culture bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential for the empowerment of black children and culture.'<sup>24</sup> In Morrison there are figures who take up the role of culture bearer and who ensure the spiritual and psychological well-being of the children of their community. Delois Jennings says that in Morrison's fiction the reality of African Americans to be cut off is addressed 'from not only their living kin but also their dead kin, from knowing and calling their names, and from continuing their responsibility of reciprocity to them in the circle of life.'<sup>25</sup> This makes the connection to the ancestral past more urgent for African American communities. Morrison creates women

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<sup>23</sup> Hill Collins, 181.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004) 12.

<sup>25</sup> La Vinia Delois Jennings, *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 83.

characters who in their status as mothers or other-mothers take up the role of a mediator to the community's past. When this is not possible, thus when there is no such common past as in *A Mercy*, or when present conditions are such that they prevent an ancient female power from being expressed, as in the character of Baby Suggs, the outcome is a communal and personal loss and a subsequent vulnerability.

### **CHAPTER 3 *Song of Solomon***

*Song of Solomon* is here seen in connection to the American South. Morrison's portrayal of motherhood is centered on the figure of Pilate, and for its most part, on her relationship with the book's main protagonist Milkman Dead. A modern bildungsroman, *Song of Solomon* describes Milkman's maturation and quest for knowledge. Lee Carr writes that 'central to both his maturation and his healing is Milkman's recognition that the cultural past of the African American South continues to create his twentieth-century present in ways that are not constraining but liberating.'<sup>26</sup> She argues that the narrative is a subversion of the slave narrative where the protagonist's initiation comes when he moves away from an oppressive South, and instead involves Milkman's move away from the North and towards the southern landscape of Shalimar, Virginia.

In order for Milkman to find spiritual and moral maturity, he needs his aunt Pilate so that he is triggered to find his communal and spiritual past in the city of his ancestors. In this sense, 'the American South is crucial to this narrative of healing, because the problem for Milkman and his family concerns not just the relationship to the past, but to a past that is specifically caught up with the history of slavery in the South.'<sup>27</sup> It is interesting then, how Morrison chooses a male hero to perform the quest for knowledge, but involves a female figure in the role of mentor and spiritual healer. Yet, Pilate's knowledge of her family past is also incomplete and so, the unity between male and female which will be discussed here is made possible because of both Milkman's and Pilate's interdependence on each other.

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<sup>26</sup> Catherine Carr Lee, "The South in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: Initiation, Healing, and Home" in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 31.2, 1998, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Lee, 1.

The figure of Pilate will be discussed thoroughly, not just in connection to Milkman, but also in her relation to Macon as they are the orphaned members of a family severed by post-slavery practices. We need to see both Pilate's and Macon's reaction towards their common past, so as to appreciate Pilate's use of it. On the contrary, Macon perpetuates the oppressive tactics of slavery, by building an economic patriarchal structure, reminiscent of a plantation. Pilate's use of the past is all the more interesting, as she exhibits the qualities of a healer.

She is one of those women favored in Morrison's fiction and who possess 'the ancient properties of traditional black womanhood.'<sup>28</sup> Morrison speaks in awe of a woman 'who is a healer and understands plants and stones (...). It's a quality than normally one associates with a mammy, a black mammy. She could nurse, she could heal, she could chop wood (...). Those women were terrific, but they were perceived of as beastly in the very things that were wonderful about them.'<sup>29</sup> Pilate protects Ruth's pregnancy, uses voodoo practices to intimidate Macon, and assumes a life-long role of a mother for Milkman. It is because of those qualities that she becomes the most important character in the novel and a representative of all those qualities that Morrison identifies with motherhood.

### **3.1 Pilate and Macon as Initiators of an Orphan Narrative**

Family is the trope used by post-slavery literature; under slavery, the family underwent dismemberment, as slaveholders tried to separate its members; it 'interrupted, differed, or perverted mother-love (...), attempted to orphan children

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<sup>28</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004) 21.

<sup>29</sup> O'Reilly, 21.

from their real parents but also to sever parents from their paternal function.<sup>30</sup> The family axis around which the narrative of *Song of Solomon* revolves initially is the relationship of Macon Dead and Pilate. Loichot writes that ‘orphan characters such as Pilate and Macon Dead (...), create and master their family narratives.’<sup>31</sup> She explains how this creates a subversion of the authority of the father. Thus, a pattern which starts off with a horizontal relation of a brother and a sister is very likely to include relations of greater enmeshment, and thus results in dispersion of authority.

Macon’s own family fails to live up to his expectations for a transmission of power from the father to the son, as Milkman in the end joins Pilate in a symbolic mother-to-son convergence and circumvents his father by searching for his ancestors in the city of Shalimar. Loichot speaks of slavery which ‘attempted to interrupt lines of transmission and communication that sustain humanity in humans.’<sup>32</sup> Since *Song of Solomon* is situated in a time when killing a black did not constitute criminal offence, it is clear slavery tactics of white domination continued into the 1920s, when Macon and Pilate’s father was shot. The two orphans are cut from their family line in an abrupt way, and do not know why or who has killed their father.

They also need to flee from the area they are growing up in and break up any feeling of connection with their past as they leave people who knew them behind. After they separate, Macon and Pilate both prove to be strong enough to survive and create a life of their own. They are left with no form of family after they fight for the gold and, from that point on, they choose different paths. Hence, the disruption of their family

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<sup>30</sup> Valérie Loichot, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse*, ed. A. James Arnold, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007) 2.

<sup>31</sup> Loichot, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Loichot, 29.

line with the death of their father is extended when the two of them break apart. It is nevertheless Pilate who decides to find him and stay in the same town where he lives: ‘Pilate decided to find her brother (...), for the child, Hagar, needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer, and if she remembered anything about Macon, he would be different. Prosperous, conventional, more like the things and people Hagar seemed to admire.’<sup>33</sup> Morrison is careful not to create any new binaries between the characters of Pilate and Macon. Pilate is in need of her brother, of a family continuity, and she realizes that when she has to think of the well-being of her daughter and grand-daughter. Her maternal instinct makes her realize that they also need a figure of male authority present. Thus, although Macon will be discussed in terms of his inability to reunite with his family roots, and his preoccupation with possession which leaves him disconnected, he is also necessary for Pilate and her family.

### **3.2 Identity Formation in Movement: Pilate and Milkman’s Travels**

Macon relies on the acquisition of things to become self-sustaining and adapts the lifestyle of the white proprietors of the city of Michigan where he lives which keeps him entrenched. On the other hand, Pilate chooses a life of travel which helps her to acquire self-knowledge. It is perhaps an indication of what Glissant writes about movement being more important than root.<sup>34</sup> By travelling through states, Pilate forms an identity in relation to the people she meets. It is difficult to argue that in *Song of Solomon* movement is privileged over a specific territory when thinking of Pilate’s

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<sup>33</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1977) 151.

<sup>34</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Transl. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor; U of Michigan P, 2010) 14



insistence to return and bury the bones of her father, or of Milkman's visit to Shalimar through which he reunites with his ancestors. Yet, it could be said that the travel is what assists the formation of identities which are placed neither here nor there; there is not a fixed center around which the characters form a consciousness of self, but rather by their relation towards one another and during a process of a constant, metaphorical exile.

Pilate's travelling results in her living together with different groups of people, and in seeing their reactions to her lack of a navel. Witnessing the horror of people upon seeing her flat stomach, she learns more about who she is.

Pilate saw the little corkscrew thing right in the middle, the little piece of skin that looked like it was made for water to drain down into, like the little whirlpools along the edges of a creek. It was just like the thing her brother had on his stomach. (...) She thought it was one more way in which males and females were different.<sup>35</sup>

Her identity is then formed on reactions towards her true self, as well as on absolute freedom. She has the freedom to choose where to go, as well as to what she will accept from people's behavior. Her physical peculiarity is something she was born with, and which marks her personality. Even though reactions are negative, they are nevertheless reactions against something which is originally hers, and not acquired by money or imposed on her by social norms. Moreover, since her journey does not start with a clear aim, Pilate builds her identity on lived experiences. What, however, maintains a sense of belonging and gives her a sound basis is the memory of her

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<sup>35</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 143.

familial ties, the ghost of the father which remains at her side, without which she would not be able to defend herself and survive the journey on her own.

Pilate is not deprived of her past, and this is the main reason we see her being in equilibrium as no other character in *Song of Solomon*. When she speaks of her father to Ruth, Pilate admits ‘I see him still. He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know.’<sup>36</sup> Her father provides her consolation, when she experiences depression after the birth of Reba ‘To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her gloom immediately. And she knew he was telling her to go back to Pennsylvania and collect what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered.’<sup>37</sup> We can once again visualize the imaginary family Loichot speaks of, if we think of Pilate’s formation of a family, which includes her dead father. Whatever remains in her memory of him, guides her and fills the void of being cut off from any connection with her predecessors despite her constant travelling and subsequent settlement in Michigan. Her stability is very much a product of her refusal to get rid of the spirit of her dead father.

It is this wholeness of Pilate that makes her a character of true spiritual power, in contrast to Macon whose riches do not provide him with a peace of mind. At the end of the novel, Milkman has reached a state of self-awareness; he has fled from his previous life and its burdens and has reconnected with his past. His journey is essentially performed not in order for him to acquire Pilate’s gold, as he himself confesses to Guitar, but to find himself:

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<sup>36</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 147.

“I need to get away. I told you, man. I got to get out of here. Be on my own.”<sup>38</sup>

Milkman in a way compensates for his father’s isolation and distancing from his family’s roots. What Macon does not achieve to do is reuniting with his past and most of all, with his sister Pilate. This is left for his successor in the family line to accomplish. It seems that the two poles, one female, represented by Pilate, and one male, represented by Macon, both need to come to terms with their family history and lineage. But the reasons why Macon is incapable of doing so, is the fact that his reliance on property makes him incapable of perceiving things the way Pilate does.

Pilate is forced to come to terms with her peculiarities; first, to find a way to protect herself from the people who see her as a creature of the devil for not having a navel, and consequently, to reconcile with her unique nature. The knowledge of her physical aspects, and thus, the inevitable awareness of being different, frees her from spiritual confines of culture and religion. ‘...Pilate refused to marry the man, who was eager to take her for his wife. Pilate was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to hide her stomach from a husband forever.’<sup>39</sup> The fact that she knows that her stomach will always bring problems even between her and a future husband, allows her to deny marriage and, subsequently, any laws of a community of people, either dictated by religious doctrines or otherwise. Pilate had to reinvent herself by using her own mind : ‘... when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero (...) Then she

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<sup>38</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 181.

<sup>39</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 147.

tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her.’<sup>40</sup>

### 3.3 Pilate’s Corporeal Womanhood

Pilate can then be said to be a complete person because of a physical and spiritual awareness which leads to material autarky. Her bootlegging business is the means to make a living but, she is not in any way over-reliant on money or material possessions. When Milkman first enters her house, he notices the ‘large sunny room that looked barren and cluttered. (...) Candles were stuck in bottles everywhere; newspaper articles and magazine pictures were nailed to the walls. But other than a rocking chair, two-straight-backed chairs, a large table, a sink and a stove, there was no furniture. Pervading everything was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit.’<sup>41</sup>

The impression the room makes on Milkman is perceived through his senses; the smell of the room which remains with him, the same way she makes a lasting impression on him by means of physical characteristics which aim at his sensory perception when he first meets her ‘The whites of her fingernails were like ivory (...) Of course, she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day: the fingers pulling thread veins from the orange sections, the berry-black lips that made her look as though she wore make-up, the earring...’<sup>42</sup> Even his father

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<sup>40</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 38.

remembers her as a little girl who ‘chew pine needles and as a result smelled even then like a forest.’<sup>43</sup>

All the ways by which Pilate draws Milkman closer to her and make him feel there is an irresistible connection between them having nothing to do with hierarchy or an imposition of authority, due to their age difference, their established relation of an aunt and a nephew, or even to economic power, such as the one Macon exhibits in his relationship with Milkman. Pilate is in perfect unison with her bodily needs, without becoming deprived of a spiritual bearing which draws Milkman closer. He admits just before she dies that ‘Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly.’<sup>44</sup> Long before reaching this conscious realization of his feelings towards her, he had been literally mesmerized by her shared singing during his first visit to her house ‘Milkman could hardly breathe. (...) When he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling, he risked a glance at his friend.’<sup>45</sup> Pilate’s spirituality which Milkman witnesses on several encounters offers him a much more profound connection to her. Pilate’s body is portrayed in a remarkable balance with her personality, without being restrictive of her spiritual dimension. Subsequently, Pilate constitutes a heroine that exhibits female emancipation, not only in opposition to her male counterparts, but one which occurs in its own right as it is centered on her body and her own experiences.

The feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz developed a philosophy of the body which resists the traditional dualism of psyche/body. Any dualism, she argues, renders one of the two terms subservient to the other. Traditionally the mind has been favored

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<sup>43</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 336.

<sup>45</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 49.

over the body, because the body has been seen as purely natural, as strictly material. This however, makes the body susceptible to becoming a commodity. Pilate's subjectivity resists commodification not because, as a woman, she can be said to be more natural, but because of her acceptance of her bodily nature. Grosz argues that the body 'provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition.'<sup>46</sup> She speaks of the necessity to think of the body as 'a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution.'<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the treatment of the body as depicted in the character of Pilate is seen to be inseparable from her personality; one cannot think of her without thinking of her looks, her movements and voice.

Additionally to her lack of a navel then, Pilate is always described in physical terms; for 'bringing her sickening smell,'<sup>48</sup> for having a voice which 'made Milkman think of pebbles,'<sup>49</sup> for having 'short hair cut regularly like a man's (...) large sleepy eyes and busy lips (...) smooth skin, hairless, scarless, and wrinkleless.'<sup>50</sup> When Milkman sees her for the first time she is peeling an orange; when Ruth visits her, Pilate offers her a peach. Macon remembers her keeping 'things in her mouth (...).Her lips were alive with movements. (...) From distance she appeared to be whispering to herself, when she was only nibbling or splitting tiny seed with her front teeth;'<sup>51</sup> she

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 20-21.

<sup>47</sup> Grosz, 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 30

remembers making a cherry-pie for him<sup>52</sup>. Whenever Pilate is mentioned it is difficult not to imagine what she looks, smells, or sounds like; without her tasting food or singing. Her omnipresent physicality is then combined with spiritual knowledge. Her body ‘enmeshes narrative and maternal transmission.’<sup>53</sup>

### **3.4 Pilate and Milkman: Spiritual Nurturing, Oral Memory, and Other-mothering**

Most importantly, Pilate offers Milkman spiritual nurturing; it is from her that he first hears about his grandfather being shot. Andrea O’Reilly explains that ‘In *The Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s survival is made possible through Pilate’s function of cultural bearer; she not only embodies, in her connection to the motherline, the ancient properties, funk, and ancestral memory of her people, she also conveys these values to her people, through the stories she tells and the songs she sings.’<sup>54</sup> What is also important, O’Reilly observes, Pilate’s telling of the family story does not happen in order for her to explain or justify her acts, as it happens when Macon or Ruth tell their own versions of Ruth’s father story.<sup>55</sup> Pilate’s strength comes from her connection with her ancestry which she then passes on to the next generation, which surprisingly is not Reba or Hagar, but Milkman. Thus, Milkman unites with his past and substitutes Macon for Pilate, but he also presents a substitute of Macon for her.

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<sup>52</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Valérie Loichot, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse*, ed. A. James Arnold, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007) 158.

<sup>54</sup> Andrea O’Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004) 107.

<sup>55</sup> O’Reilly, 107.

Pilate's mothering extends to other members of the family except for her biological offspring, as it is not thought of as only biological, but above all, it is seen as cultural nurturing. Motherhood as a site of empowerment, relates to exactly this; mothers, biological or not, are providers of both physical and spiritual nourishment, and so do not exhibit controlling, but emancipating powers towards members of their communities. In addition, the past which such mothers carry with them make them self-sustained and able to live independently from the societies they find themselves in. Pilate has the power to become an emancipating mother figure because of being impervious to imposed social constructions—she has no husband, earns money illegally, and does not rely to any accepted social norms to gain respect.

Her fearlessness is vividly portrayed when she has to defend Reba. '...approaching the man from the back, she whipped her right arm around his neck and positioned the knife at the edge of his heart (...) You know how mamas are, don't you? (...) Mamas get hurt and nervous when somebody don't like they children (...) I'd hate to push [the knife] in more and have your mama feel like I do now.'<sup>56</sup> There does not seem to be a single thing that would intimidate Pilate, and in addition, she is daunting for all people around her. By not exercising authority over her daughter and granddaughter, she passes on the feeling of fearlessness to them. In the dialogue between Hagar and Milkman Hagar admits not to be scared of Pilate or of anyone else. 'Pilate scare you? Yeah. Don't she scare you? No. Nobody scares me.(...) Pilate tells you what to do. But I don't have to do it, if I don't want to.'<sup>57</sup> Pilate initially evokes fear to other people because of her navel; she starts off being unconsciously intimidating towards others and this in turn makes her invulnerable to them.

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<sup>56</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 93-4.

<sup>57</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 96.



Pilate's not having a navel makes her symbolic mother of mothers. Again, in juxtaposing Pilate and Macon, we see her dauntless and all-knowing while he is uneasy and ignorant; she knows people and natural remedies, while he cannot know the truth about Ruth and her father and lives in uncertainty over the identity of his own children. He cannot put up with Pilate 'She told [Ruth] not to worry. Macon wouldn't bother her no more; she, Pilate, would see to it.'<sup>58</sup> Voodoo practices seem to have an effect on Macon, who is persuaded to leave Ruth carry on being pregnant to Milkman. His insecurity, moreover, is triggered by the fact that he participates in an economic system that keeps him subservient to white authority.

Pilate is the person Milkman needs to unite his song with as he matures, and not his father. This is so because the foundations of their bond seem to run deeper than financial dependence which characterizes Milkman's relationship with Macon. Macon denies himself any physical contact with his wife, and is depicted as a person entirely preoccupied by the acquisition of property; he is absorbed in transactions and plans for further investment and profit. Macon is seen to reproduce the economic structure of the plantation by his reliance on property and the pyramidal hierarchy of his business; he also reproduces in this construction the element of an enclosed space which nevertheless, limits him first. His existence is circumscribed in collecting his rents and in expanding his personal property, thus, he is trapped within a system in which he deceptively feels he has control of.

Glissant speaks of the Plantation as 'an organization formed in a social pyramid, confined within an enclosure, functioning apparently as an autarky but actually dependent, and with a technical mode of production that cannot evolve because it is

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<sup>58</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 132.

based on a slave structure.<sup>59</sup> If we make a parallel with Macon's business and see it as a symbolic Plantation, his enclosed business is bound to fail in financial terms, because of its inability to stay independent and because of its reliance on slaves/tenants. There is no other way of reproducing this structure other than by trying to multiply the flats on rent. But even more profound, is the metaphorical enclosure Macon experiences which gives him the illusion of power while leaving him incomplete and in denial of his true identity.

Pilate and Macon share the same beginning of their life story; but they choose to keep different memories of the incidents. Upon seeing their father being shot, Macon concentrates on the property which was taken from him; Pilate's memory of her father instead, works reassuringly and guides her emotionally. George B. Handley, in discussing the role of memory in post-slavery narratives writes that 'novels [such as *Song of Solomon*] unmask the construction of narrative authority and reveal that the stories each character tells are shaped by his or her social position and historical relationship to property, a relationship largely shaped by race and gender.'<sup>60</sup> The multiplicity of narrative voices in *Song of Solomon* ensure that we as readers have several versions of personal stories; particularly, the differences between Pilate and Macon's memory of their common history is primarily an act of active remembering for Pilate and a disavowal of the past for Macon. Macon wishes to be cut off from whatever happened in the past, and to assimilate in the society he lives presently. That is why he deprives his children of their communal histories and makes them weak, subservient, and isolated. The family thread runs then from Macon Dead I to Pilate

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<sup>59</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Transl. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor; U of Michigan P, 2010) 64

<sup>60</sup> George B. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White*, Ed. A. James Arnold (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 147.

and through her to Milkman. Pilate is situated in the middle of a family transmission line and bears the greatest responsibility for the family history to be restored.

Oral memory has been a central theme in post-slavery literatures. Middleton argues that *Song of Solomon* ‘tells, among other tales, a story of family distance and loss of cultural knowledge through generational migration. (...) The story of Milkman is a story about reconstituting the memory of the past and connecting it with the experiences of the present.’<sup>61</sup> Milkman in a way ensures the continuity of the Dead family and so, he needs to be prompted to start a journey of self-discovery. Once he learns how to listen, he is able to make sense of the past. Glissant says that ‘memory in [post-slavery writers’] works is not a calendar memory (...) What still remains, is the dark side of this impossible memory, which has a louder voice and one that carries farther than any chronicle or census.’<sup>62</sup> Orality, as opposed to the written word, retains the possibility of a re-writing of the past. For Pilate, the memory of the father is used imaginatively; when he says ‘Sing’, she interprets it as a summoning to sing and she does so throughout the novel. Her singing is part of her nurturing ability; her storytelling, cultural knowledge and spirituality all come into one when she sings. It is the only time, when even Macon feels an irresistible connection to her and invokes memories of her as a child.

In this beautiful scene of singing, Macon walks toward Pilate’s house and Pilate, Reba and Hagar’s voice unite in a song he cannot turn away from. ‘Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music which made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico (...) Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt

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<sup>61</sup> Joyce Irene Middleton, “Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” in *College English*, Volume 55, 1993, 72.

<sup>62</sup> Glissant, 72.

the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight.<sup>63</sup> In those moments, Macon experiences a longing for connection and feels his belongings do not provide any comfort. ‘Scattered here and there, his houses stretched up beyond him like squat ghosts with hooded eyes. He didn’t like to look at them in this light. During the day they were reassuring to see; now they did not seem to belong to him at all.’<sup>64</sup> Yet, those moments which show Macon how futile it is to merely gather possessions are not as strong to make him change. He is trapped in the economic system he supports.

It is interesting to note that having the memory of her father renders Pilate a powerful figure but does not ensure the same empowering qualities for Reba and Hagar. This is perhaps so, in order to signify the importance of a spiritual motherhood and one which is not restricted to biology. Pilate’s qualities as they have been so far discussed are to a great extent the result of her being a mother. Pilate’s motherhood is not experienced as institution but as a nurturing function that has its basis on the woman’s own cultural past—with the result that women have the knowledge and responsibility of their bodies and its needs. In post-slavery societies, motherhood is more urgently defined by cultural knowledge which passes on from the mother to next generations.

Yet, as Morrison explains ‘a woman is strongest when some of her sensibilities are formed by men at an early, certainly at an important age. (...) It’s really a balance between classical male and female forces that produces, perhaps, a kind of complete

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<sup>63</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 27.

person.’<sup>65</sup> It is after all, an overall framework of balancing and reciprocity in the entirety of the novel that is pervading and which might explain its title. An Old Testament book, the *Song of Songs* has been interpreted variously through the centuries, and as a love song between two lovers by modern critics. Woman and man unite in the *Song of Songs*; in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* the unity of male and female voices is achieved between Pilate and Milkman in an exchange of singing and cultural bearing, so that it does not produce a counter system of female authority.

### **3.5 From Father to Husband: Patriarchy Sustained**

Another female figure to be discussed is Ruth, to provide a counter-example of the emancipating image of women as mothers and cultural bearers given by Morrison.

The two of them are compared when Ruth visits Pilate:

They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read, but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it.’<sup>66</sup>

Although they are mentioned immediately after as having ‘profound similarities’ on the basis of a connection with their dead fathers, we can see how Ruth is very different from Pilate as she is entangled in a patriarchal system; her education, dress, economic reliance and confinement are all parts of this system and attest to her

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<sup>65</sup> Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 106-7.

<sup>66</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 139.

oppression. Pilate's immunity to them as she lives outside prescribed cultural norms was so far discussed as the ways by which she manages to achieve equilibrium, autonomy, emancipation. Ruth is on the contrary unable to disentangle herself from a system she involuntarily became part of by marrying Macon. Except for ensuring physical control over her in their household, Macon imposes a whole set of values that enhance Ruth's subjection. She belongs for example to a society of whites due to the family's financial situation, and ends up not being accepted by the women of that society because of her skin color. Her isolation and dependence on Macon is complete; that is why she has no control over her life, not even in her status of a mother.

As a result, Ruth's experience of motherhood is by no means fulfilling; nursing Milkman until the age of four is a desperate attempt to retrieve the bodily pleasure of nurturing her own son and substitutes her lack of a sexual life. Loichot adds, that 'nursing is the only way Ruth can exercise control over her body (...) it establishes her body as an essential link between her and her son. It institutes a new symbolic transmission, so to speak, a "milk genealogy" based on the maternal, confirmed by the ensuing nickname "Milkman," which replaces the fatherly bequeathed name.'<sup>67</sup> It is no coincidence that Ruth resorts to nursing, to fight isolation and Macon's abusive behavior. Nursing makes her fantasize 'his lips were pulling from her a thread of light.'<sup>68</sup> Except for the intimacy with her son, nursing offers her the fantasy of her being able to produce a secret power. Ruth is crushed under patriarchal law, and the only way she can resist it is by extending her nursing time to prolong a motherhood in which she is the power-giving figure.

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<sup>67</sup> Loichot, 170.

<sup>68</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 13.

In addition, she clings to her dead father, in order to feel she is respected and needed. As she admits to Milkman her father was ‘the only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died. Lots of people were interested in whether I lived or died, but he cared.’<sup>69</sup> This attempt can of course offer her some solace, but it cannot be as empowering as Pilate’s connection to her father has been. This is so, because ‘the economic controlling legacy of the plantation and slavery is doubled by a patriarchal oppression that relegates women to the realm of the domestic and turns them into malleable objects.’<sup>70</sup> Ruth then is seen to be oppressed by an economic and social system, both her father and her husband endorse. Poet and feminist writer Adrienne Rich explains that in patriarchal societies ‘from very ancient times the identity, the very personality, of the man depends on power, and on a power in a certain, specific sense: that of power over others.’<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, Macon’s hatred towards Ruth involves his fight for dominion which was taking place when Ruth’s father was still alive. Ruth is left powerless and cannot maintain an empowering motherhood. If ‘the one aspect which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense—authority over and control of another—has been motherhood,’<sup>72</sup> Ruth fails to do so because she has always been subjected to male authority and possessiveness. This stands in sharp contrast to Pilate’s guiding voice of her father.

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<sup>69</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 124.

<sup>70</sup> Loichot, 166.

<sup>71</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Ltd, 1977) 64.

<sup>72</sup> Rich, 67.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Morrison's depiction of motherhood as a site of empowerment in *Song of Solomon* does not produce female characters who become threatening or ones which subvert the existing power system; on the contrary, femininity and the maternal is non-violent although it can resist patriarchal authority. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison points towards a potentiality of unity when both male and female characters engage in dialogue. When one is subservient to the other, as is the case of Ruth and Macon, no such unity is possible. Authority forces violence and thus, Milkman has to defy his father or lead a life of oppression by submitting to Macon's system of values. On the contrary, what happens in the interplay of Pilate and Milkman is fulfilling for both. Their metaphorical consummation happens through a reciprocal engagement, a spiritual intercourse; she tells him the story of his family foreshadowing his subsequent trip to Shalimar, while he finds and tells her the real circumstances of her father's death. He sings to her before she dies, she sings to him when he prepares for life in his teens.

In a reversal of the allusion to Solomon, the wisest of men, *Song of Solomon* is not about wise, powerful, righteous men. It leads us to a world of peace and goodness, closer to an etymology of Solomon meaning peace, through Pilate and her relationship with Milkman. The unity of female and male is possible, without one being dominant over the other. Toni Morrison narrates the story of the family of Deads to show that although the family suffered dismemberment due to sustaining slavery practices, female nature retained its capacity to resist them. Thus, the spiritual mothering Pilate offers to Milkman overcomes the system of oppression perpetuated by Macon and ensures the continuation of the family line. Pilate's mothering shares thus the empowering qualities of motherhood found in Morrison's fiction. Its



empowering potential does not involve power over others, but power offered to others. Children benefited by mothers or other-mothers, are children empowered. Their emancipation restores the violence inflicted upon previous generations, and gives hope for future ones.

## CHAPTER 4 *Beloved*

*Beloved* portrays the lives of the Sweet Home slaves and reverences motherhood with the mother figure of Sethe. Sethe's heartrending, and at the same time, venerated experience of mothering under slavery accounts for the special place the novel has taken in American literature. Sethe's infanticide is the darkness which lingers and haunts the story of *Beloved*, its horror partially alleviated by *Beloved*'s return. In terms of narrative technique, infanticide is used as a reference point which is recalled time and again during the narrative, a problem whose solution is constantly deferred at every turning point of the text. Sethe's act is not without a historical precedent. There is evidence of the way enslaved women experienced motherhood and of how women were reported to have been 'a constant source of frustration to managers and overseers' by resorting to various forms of resistance.<sup>73</sup>

Fox-Genovese writes that 'for women who loved their children, infanticide and even abortion constituted costly forms of resistance' and that those women who carried them out were 'resisting from the center of their experience as women.'<sup>74</sup> Toni Morrison was inspired by one such newspaper story. Margaret Garner was an enslaved woman in a Kentucky farm who fled to Ohio with her husband and children. Surrounded by slave catchers who hunted her down she killed her two-year-old daughter and wounded her other children to prevent their recapturing.

Sethe's mothering however is not exhausted with an analysis of her claiming of the life of one of her children and her relationship with *Beloved* before and after she

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<sup>73</sup> Barbara Bush, "Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies" in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 196.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 324.

returns to the house on Bluestone Road. She is a merciful figure of motherly affection and female emancipation and will be seen as such in her relation to all of her children, as well as in the way she defines herself as mother. The defining moment when Sethe breaks free, despite the adversary conditions in the Garners house, is when she feels that her children's well-being is at stake. The survival and dignity of their children was the priority of enslaved mothers during the period of slavery in America. King admits that 'mothers accepted the responsibility to provide the salve, kindle the hope, and maintain the love that would help their children survive.'<sup>75</sup>

In addition, Sethe's determination will be compared with the way Paul D and the rest of the men experienced and reacted to their enslaved condition. Demetrakopoulos argues that 'Women are ultimately defined as different from men for one simple reason: We can be mothers.'<sup>76</sup> If motherhood has the potential to define female nature, this is very much due to the physical aspect of motherhood, the closeness experienced by the two bodies. Sethe's resilience can be thought of as the outcome of her privileged position of a woman and mother. That is, the fact that a mother is physically bound to her children, at least during the time of pregnancy and the children's infant years, ensures to some extent the feeling of belonging to each other, the intimacy and subsequent awareness of their bond, and the privilege to define themselves in relation to one another, and not in economic terms imposed by slave masters.

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<sup>75</sup> Wilma King, "Suffer them Till Death: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America" in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 162.

<sup>76</sup> Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *African American Review*, Volume 26, 1992, 51.

Fox-Genovese moreover notes that ‘resistance was woven into the fabric of slave women’s lives and identities. If they defined themselves as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters within the slave community that offered them positive images of themselves as women, they were also likely to define themselves in opposition to the images of the slaveholders for whom their status as slave ultimately outweighed their identity as woman. The ubiquity of their resistance ensured that its most common forms would be those that followed the patterns of everyday life.’<sup>77</sup>

The empowerment that comes with bearing and nurturing children is confirmed with the figure of Sethe, and insightfully contrasted to Baby Suggs. ‘American slaveholders viewed motherhood as an asset, and they encouraged reproduction for pecuniary reasons alone’<sup>78</sup> which meant pregnant women were in some sense protected in order to be able to produce offspring to be used in the plantation. However, slave mothers were later separated from their children with devastating effects for the mother. Baby Suggs is one of the tragic mothers who lose their children when they are sold away. She remains alive for the purpose of seeing her only son return, but cannot bear to see one of her grandchildren being lost. Sethe on the other hand, manages to survive even after killing her beloved daughter, whereas Baby Suggs is worn out by all that has happened to her as a mother and grandmother due to slavery. As a consequence, she assumes the role of a protective, guiding mother figure for Sethe, and the spiritual guide for the people of her community, but cannot find consolation for her own experience of slavery. Sethe is then portrayed as a mother figure favored by motherhood, as the privilege to keep her children close for a

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<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 329.

<sup>78</sup> Wilma King, “Suffer them Till Death: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 147.

considerable length of time, makes her more resilient than Baby Suggs. Mothers losing their children to slavery in Toni Morrison's fiction are rarely seen to be able to overcome the pain and distress.

The importance of motherhood and its liberating potential is not only discussed for giving mothers the strength, determination and hope to overcome difficulties and fight for their children's survival. Most importantly, I argue that motherhood is a site of empowerment because it is a creative force; both *Beloved* and *Denver* are agents of recovery from a painful past. *Denver* is according to Rushdy 'the site of hope in Morrison's novel. She is the daughter of history.'<sup>79</sup> This unique relationship between mother and daughter is a useful parameter which illuminates the significance of motherhood. Rich argues that 'this cathexis between mother and daughter –essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other.'<sup>80</sup>

Both *Denver* and *Beloved* claim their mother and need to be in close proximity to her. Additionally, they function as a metaphor for history being rewritten. After haunting the house for 18 years, *Beloved* appears embodied to be able to experience the mothering she has missed but she is also 'the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly.'<sup>81</sup> Since the story line weaves around the maternal bond,

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<sup>79</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *American Literature*, Volume 64, 1992, 571.

<sup>80</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Ltd, 1977) 226.

<sup>81</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *American Literature*, Volume 64, 1992, 571.

history is re-written through the mother's body. In *Beloved*, historical recovery is not performed by Beloved since she disappears after having re-lived the incident of her killing but it is taken up by Denver. Denver then is the daughter who hears the family story, re-lives the family's past with the symbolic re-embodiment of Beloved, and represents its hopeful solution.

Motherhood in *Beloved* is centered on Sethe. I shall first analyze her having in mind her struggle for the freedom of her children, and then move on to an analysis of infanticide, as well as an interpretation of the symbolic representation of her bond with her two daughters.

#### **4.1 Sethe and manifestations of mothering**

Even before outlining her motherly nature, Sethe is presented to be a woman of a challenging posture. As with all Morrison's novels, *Beloved* is a story of women, their specific experiences, hardships, and concerns. The context of slavery does not make it difficult for modern readers to identify with her female protagonists because their representation does not stop with the depiction of their enslavement. On the contrary, by showing women's resilience against their aggressors, Morrison gives her women dignity. Her novels do not begin and end with a description of their humiliation as if to ask for pity, but they offer them narrative space in which the depth of their intuition, inventiveness, and affection is expressly shown.

Sethe is described from the beginning as a woman whose gaze could make one feel uncomfortable. Her eyes 'were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks

of what that emptiness held.’<sup>82</sup> Paul D admits that when he first enters her house and recalls how Sethe looked like when they were still in Sweet Home. Denver is also aware of a certain kind of fearlessness her mother possesses. She knows her mother to be ‘a quiet, queenly woman (...) The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer’s restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either.’<sup>83</sup>

There are two decisive moments for Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home. The first is when she instinctively understands the meaning of schoolteacher’s lesson of animal and human characteristics. Her illiteracy does not impede her understanding of the situation. She is able to resist a definition that degrades her and that would extend to her children. Most importantly, Sethe decides to run away despite the fact that the men’s escape is discovered because of her daughter being deprived of mother’s milk. From that point on there is nothing to hold her back:

‘All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. (...) They beat you and you was pregnant? And they took my milk!’<sup>84</sup>

The urgency of nursing one’s child is evidently one of the things which define motherhood in *Beloved*. Breastfeeding is favored in Morrison’s fiction which includes several descriptions of it, including Ruth’s prolonged nursing in *Song of Solomon*. Sethe’s own beating was not perceived as harsh a punishment as the fact that the milk stolen was rightfully her daughter’s. She breaks free to ensure that her children will

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<sup>82</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 11.

<sup>83</sup> *Beloved*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> *Beloved*, 20.

not be deprived of it. In this way, nurturing one's child becomes an imperative felt by a mother, an imperative not to be explained in words. The bodily experiences of motherhood are shown to be the substantial constituents of human existence. They do not and cannot be dictated by culture and they cannot be explained in language as they belong to a prelingual, precultural state. Sethe feels the need to milk her children, and this is probably the one last element of mothering which cannot be violated. Nursing is depicted then, not in terms of a sacred, sacrificial occupation as it has been viewed in patriarchal culture, but as a felt, corporeal demand which defines what is humane.

Wyatt coins the term 'maternal symbolic' to 'discuss not only an alternative language incorporating maternal and material values, but also a system that (...) locates subjects in relation to other subjects.'<sup>85</sup> This is important for the depiction of motherhood in Morrison. One of Sethe's most cherished, blissful moments is when she is surrounded by her children. 'Sethe lay in bed under, around, over, among but especially with them all. The little girl dribbled clear spit into her face, and Sethe's laugh of delight was so loud the crawling-already? baby blinked. Buglar and Howard played with her ugly feet, after daring each other to be the first to touch them. She kept kissing them. She kissed the backs of their necks, the tops of their heads and the centers of their palms, and it was the boys who decided enough was enough.'<sup>86</sup>

Nancy Chodorow argues that 'the different structure of the feminine and masculine oedipal triangle and process of oedipal experience that results from women's

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<sup>85</sup> Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *PMLA*, Volume 108, 1993, 475.

<sup>86</sup> *Beloved*, 114.



mothering' is why women 'define and experience themselves relationally.'<sup>87</sup> Sethe however has not experienced a woman's mothering, but she is a woman defined in relation to her children because of the corporeal experience of motherhood during pregnancy, and the ensuing time of breastfeeding. When Sethe is in the shed holding dead Beloved in her hands, Baby Suggs hands little Denver to her:

"It's time to nurse your youngest," she said.

Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go Baby Suggs

shook her head. "One at a time," she said and traded the living with the dead.<sup>88</sup>

Nursing after having murdered one's child is needed to restore Sethe's life-giving emotion. Her attention has to be directed to the needs of another of her children to soothe the deadly instinct that has prevailed. The wise authority of Baby Suggs aims at protecting not just the rest of the children, but also Sethe, who contains her madness and is able to perform her motherly duties, as if reminded of what she is supposed to do.

Going back to the time before the defining moment of infanticide, (which I shall analyze separately), we can see another manifestation of Sethe's motherhood in the description of childbirth. Sethe's labor in the open connects motherhood with freedom. 'Morrison is elaborating the figure of the heroic slave mother that in many female slave narratives replaces the figure of the heroic male fugitive.'<sup>89</sup> Having sent the older ones to meet Baby Suggs, Sethe gives birth to her youngest child away from conditions of slavery, and manages to bring Denver to life despite her weakened

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<sup>87</sup> Nancy Chodorow, "The Psychodynamics of the Family" in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 194.

<sup>88</sup> *Beloved*, 187.

<sup>89</sup> Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *PMLA*, Volume 108, 1993, 475.

condition. She is able to give life to Denver with only a white unknown girl to assist her. Denver is the only child born in freedom, and so, the one who will be strong enough to survive her mother's time in prison, a life in a haunted house, as well as Sethe's depression. Sethe speaks proudly of Denver's endurance to Paul D:

'Don't worry about her. She's a charmed child (...). Nothing bad can happen to her. (...) Everybody I knew dead or gone or dead and gone. Not her. Not my Denver. Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it (...) she pulled a whitegirl out of the hill. (...) I went to jail (...) Rats bit everything in there but her.'<sup>90</sup>

Sethe's mothering is identified to a great extent with freeing her children from slavery, long before she refuses to submit Beloved to her hunting white masters. One grieves over the fate of her two boys who, born in slavery, and upon seeing their mother killing their sister, continue to live a life based on fear. Their way to fight their fate is by running away. In this way, they lead the life of a slave, and do not disentangle themselves from the experience of slavery. As any other slave, freed or not, they will continue to live as fugitives, running away from a haunting past and severing their family ties. It is no coincidence either that Beloved is the one whose liberation from slavery comes by losing her life. Her right to be nursed is what triggered Sethe's flight in the first place, and so, Beloved's existence has always balanced between life and death, between slavery and breaking-free.

Denver is on the contrary, a child favored by being born in freedom. This results in her being the determined daughter, the one who will fend for her mother when she is no longer capable of providing for herself. Denver's experience of slavery is

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<sup>90</sup> *Beloved*, 52.

essentially an experience of its aftermath and she proves strong enough to overcome it. It is the consequences of slavery, the way they have been inscribed on the lives of Sethe and Beloved that affect Denver as she experiences everything relationally. The depiction of Sethe's children, each facing conditions analogous to their specific experience of slavery, is one more indication of the relation between slavery and emancipating possibilities of motherhood as presented in *Beloved*.

To return our focus on Sethe, she earns a costly flight to freedom thanks to and because of her status of woman and mother. 'Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that "somebody" son who had fathered every one of her children.'<sup>91</sup> Among the Sweet Home slaves, she is the one privileged with a husband, a family, and subsequently, the possibility of a future life where she can live outside slavery but also, in a wholeness of self. The maternal instinct then can be a guiding principle on the course of action she needs to take. Sethe can be seen as a plentiful mother because she has been endowed with a time of familial closeness. When compared to Baby Suggs, Sethe is a blessed mother. Baby Suggs admits that 'A man ain't nothing but a man,'(...) "But a son? Well now, that is somebody,"<sup>92</sup> but this is an acknowledgement of the superiority of mother over wife, rather than son over man. The fact that Baby Suggs has seven of her eight children taken and sold away, the eight children of six different fathers that she never meets during the narrative, makes her a mother whose nurturing capacities are taken away from her, and thus, her resilience too.

The strength we see building in Sethe, made possible by preserving the bond with her children, is snatched from Baby Suggs, and through her, from all enslaved mothers

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<sup>91</sup> *Beloved*, 29.

<sup>92</sup> *Beloved*, 29.

whose children were sold away. Baby Suggs, deprived of her children, is deprived of her self:

‘Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like (...) Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me?’<sup>93</sup>

Baby Suggs is not able to reach self-definition in depth, because her primary role, that of the mother, is denied. Her mothering capacities are expressed upon Halle, and the family he has created. However, when she loses a grandchild because of her former slavemasters, she loses all hope. Her resistance is broken, and so she stops going to the clearing and awaits her death in bed. Morrison has explained that the book is about ‘the people called slaves (...). What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they’re willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another—that was incredible to me.’<sup>94</sup>

Paul D’s questioning of his manhood is also indicative of the privileging of women defining themselves as mothers in Morrison. In a reversal of the claim of women’s vulnerability, Paul D seems to be unsure of his masculine identity. Although a free man for several years he still tries to understand who he is, using the ideological tools of his former slavemaster:

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<sup>93</sup> *Beloved*, 172-3.

<sup>94</sup> Bonnie Angelo, “The Pain of Being Black” in *Time* 22 May 1989, 120 quoted in Deborah Ayer Sitter “The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*” in *African American Review*, Volume 26, 1992, 17.

‘He grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. (...) He thought what they said had merit, and what they felt was serious(...). It was schoolteacher who taught them otherwise (...) they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race.’<sup>95</sup> Nancy Chodorow explains that ‘throughout their development [men] have tended to repress their affective relational needs, and to develop ties based more on categorical and abstract role expectations, particularly with other males.’<sup>96</sup> Paul D is thus unable to get rid of the identity granted to him in Sweet Home.

As a result, Paul D’s status of a free man has not rendered him truly free. The patriarchal structure of the white society leaves male slaves more astray than women after they abandon the plantation. Sethe’s determination, as was previously said, has to do with the fact she is a mother and thus, tied both to her children, as well as to the self-definition of a mother. Paul D as well as Halle, do not form an identity in relation to other members of their black community and define themselves in their master’s terms. Once outside the plantation, they are either lost, or in the case of Paul D, unable to disentangle themselves from its laws. At times, Paul D’s reverie seems almost nostalgic of the time he was at Sweet Home. Sethe on the contrary asserts that she will tolerate ‘no notebook for my babies and measuring string neither,’<sup>97</sup> and rejects the standards of her former masters despite the price of such determination. Halle is one more example of a male figure who cannot cope with conditions of slavery, nor of its ideological tools. He is said to be broken by the sight of men taking Sethe’s milk. He does not find his family in the period of 18 years that elapse from

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<sup>95</sup> *Beloved*, 154-5.

<sup>96</sup> Chodorow, 188.

<sup>97</sup> *Beloved*, 243.

their escape. He also buys Baby Suggs freedom through a negotiation based upon the master's terms, that is, on a price fixed by the slaveowner.

All in all, Sethe's fight for freedom is realized on a very essential level. It is not limited to resistance against spatial enclosure, and is not merely an act of biological survival. The foundations of her strength lie in the fact that the self-definition of a mother is something that cannot be taken away from her, since she has ensured that she and her children have not been separated. As a mother, she has the consciousness of a bond which is almost primordial, and as a result, she is impervious to exosomatic definitions of her and her children. This will be better illustrated in the analysis of her killing Beloved. The law of white people coming to take her does not influence her: 'Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers. She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cherry blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight?'<sup>98</sup> It is important to see Sethe's motherhood one which testifies for the empowerment of mothers, since she is the one who is ultimately defined as mother during the narrative, and as such, is seen to be accountable to her children only. This however, requires the analysis of her act of infanticide.

#### **4.2 Infanticide, or Death in Mother's Hands**

Sethe's infanticide although central to the novel is difficult to analyze or comprehend fully. Wyatt argues that 'the novel withholds judgment on Sethe's act and persuades readers to do the same, presenting the infanticide as the ultimate contradiction of

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<sup>98</sup> Beloved, 187.

mothering under slavery.’<sup>99</sup> The nature of such an act makes it difficult to provide an answer of whether what Sethe has done is justified or not. I will try to show how Morrison uses infanticide both literally as well as metaphorically. In the first case, the description of infanticide in the novel helps to connect Sethe’s act with mothers who have committed infanticide during the course of history and raise questions over the validity of any objections towards women who under conditions of slavery have resorted to it. As a metaphor, *Beloved*, the child who is killed by its mother and then returns embodied, is used to show Sethe’s active recovery of a slavery past. Marianne Hirsch describes *Beloved* as ‘memory itself; she is the story of slavery, the memory of slavery come back to confront the community whose future, until that point, had been to “keep the past at bay,” the community that had been trying not to remember.’<sup>100</sup>

On the literal level then, *Beloved* relates to both the historical figure of Margaret Garner and at the same time, to infanticide as a social practice present from ancient to modern times. Margaret Garner, the woman whose story inspired Morrison to write *Beloved*, was tried not for murder but for destruction of property because giving slaves the status of a human being would challenge the institution of slavery. Through the ages, infanticide was considered a crime for similar reasons. Adrienne Rich provides examples of institutionalized infanticide in the case of the infant being female, and argues against the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood in marriage which ‘guaranteed a man its conjugal rights’ and which in turn assumed that the wife and children constituted property of man.<sup>101</sup> Rich goes on to say that ‘throughout history numberless women have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally (...)’, and that ‘these terrible, prevalent

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<sup>99</sup> Wyatt, 476.

<sup>100</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Mothers and Daughters” in *Signs*, Volume 7, 1981, 105.

<sup>101</sup> Rich, 256-280.

acts have to be distinguished from infanticide as a deliberate social policy.<sup>102</sup> Rich argues that the power over women's bodies should be given to women. Moreover, infanticide under slavery can be seen as a mother's act to free her children.

In *Beloved*, life rests in the hands of women. Sethe decides to slay her daughter, in the same way she ensures she will be given the milk necessary to keep her alive. Denver is born with the help of a white woman who assists Sethe in childbirth, after having first saved Sethe's life the night before. Baby Suggs takes care of her son's family, and helps Sethe once she arrives on 124 Bluestone. Women are the life-giving and life-sustaining forces of the book; and inevitably, they can become life-taking figures too. In the world of *Beloved*, the only person permitted to question the right Sethe has to kill Beloved is Beloved. Baby Suggs 'could not condemn Sethe's rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last.'<sup>103</sup>

Toni Morrison's view that language is inadequate when it has to represent experiences—such as slavery—is proven time and again within the narrative. There are things, such as infanticide, the full scope of which a reader cannot grasp. We can only bear witness to the reactions of the characters to catch a glimpse of feelings which are ungraspable, and so, not able to be rationalized and expressed fully by linguistic means. Baby Suggs does not judge Sethe, she just lets go. Sethe's two sons moreover cannot live in fear and go away from the house and its memories. Those are ways in which people react towards the killing, but no-one is able to speak of it, not even Sethe.

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<sup>102</sup> Rich, 258.

<sup>103</sup> *Beloved*, 221.



Sethe is asked to explain herself to Paul D once he hears of the killing, but does not articulate an apology, or a sound reply. Paul D admits ‘It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round.’<sup>104</sup> Sethe ‘knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off—she could never explain.’<sup>105</sup> Sethe does not feel she has to explain herself to the people of her community. She does feel impervious to the imposition of law which got her in prison, and insists on taking her daughter with her, as caring for her is much more imperative than anything else. She feels guilty towards and needs to explain herself to Beloved only. We hear the mother’s voice addressing Beloved: ‘Thank God I don’t have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All. You know I never would a left you. Never. (...) I go you out baby. (...) I got right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you. You remember that, don’t you; that I did? That when I got here I had milk enough for all?’<sup>106</sup>

Sethe’s life-taking act is closer to an understanding of motherhood as expressed in mythic traditions of the ancient world. Giancola writes that the Great Mother found in civilizations of Neolithic times, thus in pre-patriarchal cultures, was said to be ‘the Divine Creatrix and final judge of all Reality.’<sup>107</sup> She argues that there were two notions of justice in the ancient world, one ‘where Justice was seen as the avenging/mediating force of the Great Mother’ and the other, developed in the dominant patriarchal culture which ‘provides our modern day conception of justice as

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<sup>104</sup> *Beloved*, 197.

<sup>105</sup> *Beloved*, 200.

<sup>106</sup> *Beloved*, 34.

<sup>107</sup> Donna Marie Giancola, “Justice and the Face of the Great Mother (East and West),” Paideia Project, BU Unviversity, 1 Jun. 2013 <<http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Comp/CompGian.htm>>

an abstract principle.’<sup>108</sup> It seems that in creating Sethe and her resolution to save her children by killing them, Morrison portrays motherhood in its primordial, all-encompassing, supreme-power sense, one which rather takes the blame and guilt away from Sethe’s act. The treatment of enslaved people in a way that disregards their humanity generates a response that has to be retrieved from the very depths of female consciousness. What makes the connection of Sethe’s motherhood with the Great Mother more intriguing is the fact that the Great Mother includes both creative and destructive forces. ‘Her function as Justice is severe and horrific. This is the "dark side" of the Mother (...). She is the force which adjusts internal relations to the external world.’<sup>109</sup> Sethe reacts to the violence towards her children using a force of a pre-cultural nature.

### 4.3 Mothers and daughters

Adrienne Rich writes that ‘mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.’<sup>110</sup> Beloved needs to return embodied to express the anger for her murder as well as to be able enjoy the motherly nurturance she was deprived of. Denver understands that Sethe is giving herself up completely to Beloved’s whims because she is ‘trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it.’<sup>111</sup> Beloved is ‘the one and only person she felt

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<sup>108</sup> Giancola

<sup>109</sup> Giancola

<sup>110</sup> Rich, 220.

<sup>111</sup> *Beloved*, 308.

she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love.<sup>112</sup> This strong connection on both an ethical as well as a bodily level creates a sense of belonging and possessiveness. Sethe has been said to be reproducing the plantation economy in her attempt to repossess the body of her daughter. Yet the right and enjoyment of possession is mutual. As much as Sethe considers Beloved a part of her, so does her daughter. There is a separate passage for each of the mother and daughters to claim each other: 'Beloved, she my daughter. She mine', 'Beloved is my sister (...). She's mine Beloved. She's mine', 'I am Beloved and she is mine.'<sup>113</sup>

Sethe's relation to Beloved might be interestingly close to the Eleusis mysteries and the Demeter-Kore myth which according to Rich, rests on a mother-daughter bond that is 'endangered and complex.'<sup>114</sup> Rich argues that 'Each daughter, even in the millennia before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back for death. And every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self.'<sup>115</sup> After all, the house on Bluestone Road is a household of women, whose emotional needs rest primarily on one other, and is characterized by absence of men, as well as, men's implied inability to handle situations they find themselves in.

Morrison's fiction is occupied by mothers and daughters, often producing a schema of daughter, mother, grandmother. They form a motherline which secures the continuity of family and African heritage. Sethe is both a mother and a daughter of a slave who did not make it alive. Through Sethe's remembering of her mother we learn that she

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<sup>112</sup> *Beloved*, 309.

<sup>113</sup> *Beloved*,

<sup>114</sup> Rich, 240.

<sup>115</sup> Rich, 240.

was hanged along with other slaves leaving her orphaned. Moreover, that her mother had killed the children whose fathers were whites, and kept Sethe only. Rushdy writes that ‘in remembering her own relationship to her two daughters, she is able to understand her mother’s acts and her grandmother’s code. By situating herself within a communal narrative of grandmother-mother-daughter relationships, Sethe is able to understand herself.’<sup>116</sup>

If slave mothers are able to sustain life in their community through the bonds with their offspring, it is no wonder daughters are the privileged children. They perpetuate and relay the knowledge and stamina as they can easily identify with their mothers and in turn become mothers themselves. Women are rendered powerless when they are not able to retain the memory of their mothering. *Beloved* is an angry ghost, frustrated for losing the connection with her mother and her affectionate mothering. Demetrakopoulos argues that Sethe is ‘a mother devouring her children’, and speaks of ‘the dangers of mothering to the individuation of the mother herself.’<sup>117</sup> However, my understanding of the motherhood Morrison promotes amounts exactly to this: that human beings are necessarily and essentially defined in connection to others, and conditioned to remain such. In other words, Sethe’s inability to disentangle herself from her children relates to an inherently felt demand for connectedness with others.

An additional metaphorical function of the mother-daughter bond is exemplified with Denver. ‘Her character figures African-American survival, the unlegendary descendants who have put the memory of such as *Beloved* behind them.’<sup>118</sup> Denver is Sethe’s future and thus, through her, a recovery of the past of slavery is made

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<sup>116</sup> Rushdy, 590.

<sup>117</sup> Demetrakopoulos, 52.

<sup>118</sup> Caroline Rody, *The Daughter’s Return: African American and Caribbean Women’s Fictions of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 29.

possible. Denver learns to read and write, goes to school, asks for a job to support Sethe when she is not capable of doing so. Denver is the surviving daughter and the one who makes amends with the community. Born in freedom she is the one who manages to put the past aside and continue the family history.

#### **4. 4 Conclusion**

Morrison depicts African-American slavery by focusing on Sethe and Beloved's relationship, and thus speaks of slavery primarily through the violation of the mother bond. Sethe is the central character and a mother who struggles for the freedom and dignity of her children. Her experience of motherhood is given a corporeal element by depicting its physical aspects in contrast to the corporeal violation endured by slaves. Moreover, the mother-daughter bond is used as a metaphor for a re-writing of history since Beloved's return enables her to tell her story and help Sethe recover from a traumatizing past. The mother-daughter bond is further illustrated as a site of empowerment when Denver becomes the emancipated daughter and chooses to move on to a future life that is unburdened from the ghosts of the past.

The greatest part of the novel is not set in slavery's real time; that is, the description of the conditions of enslaved people in Sweet Home is made through narrations and remembrances of the characters. In addition, although Morrison describes certain scenes of corporeal punishment, most of those incidents are referred to through the scars left on enslaved bodies. In other words, she focuses on how such events were experienced by enslaved people, and how they managed a process of healing. This is done in order to signify the importance of a subjective kind of history. Thus, slavery and its depiction with the story of Sethe and her daughters results in a different understanding of history. It challenges the way slavery has been recorded and focuses more on how enslaved people lived through it.

## CHAPTER 5 *A Mercy*

*A Mercy* is one more novel inhabited by mothers and other-mothers. This time, emphasis is not put on a single mother figure; instead, motherhood is a theme equally shared by the mother figures of the novel and each figure engages in a motherly function differently. ‘Morrison depicts motherhood as a complex state that is influenced by powerful biological, psychological, and cultural forces.’<sup>119</sup> To this point in my thesis, I have discussed Toni Morrison’s depiction of three distinct aspects of motherhood in her fiction: as a special resource for providing rootedness through connection to a cultural past; as women’s ability to form their identity relationally and to function as other-mothers; and as a very personal, corporeal experience. Those elements make up the empowering potential of motherhood in Toni Morrison’s fiction, and are all present in *A Mercy* as well.

The three aspects of motherhood are illustrated by the relationship of three pairs of women, each consisting of a mother/other-mother and a child. The first pair is formed by Florens and her mother, the second by Lina and Florens, and the third one, by Sorrow and her newborn daughter. The context of slavery enhances the depiction of the emancipating potential of motherhood, as the bond of a mother to her children is shown to resist the violence of slavery and to be able to reclaim its natural, life-giving role.

To begin with, Florens and her mother form a maternal relationship which is defined by cultural knowledge passed on from the mother to the child. The narrative begins with Florens’ voice, as she recalls how her mother gave her up to the stranger who

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<sup>119</sup> Paula Gallant Eckard, *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 34.

becomes her master, and ends with the guiding voice of Florens's mother addressing Florens and asking for her understanding. It is the same mother who asks for Jacob Vaark's mercy and saves her daughter from a cruel slave owner, an act which marks the story and shows Morrison's intentions in a book under so titled. Mercy given to people in need is an act which happens repeatedly in the narrative. It is not mercy 'bestowed by God',<sup>120</sup> as Florens's mae confesses, but compassion expected from one human being to another. There are many instances of merciful acts in *A Mercy*: Jacob Vaark accepts Florens; the indentured workers Scully and Willard help Sorrow give birth to her second child; and Widow Ealing provides a hungry and lost Florens with food and shelter. Human life rests as much on the kindness of strangers, as on the astuteness and foresight of mothers or women who take up mothering responsibilities.

Motherhood seen not as biological kinship but as other-mothering is represented with the female figure of Lina, a native American who oversees the household and earns Rebekka's trust. Lina engages in Florens' education, nurturance and protection, as if she were her real mother. Their relationship is additionally of special interest because the two women do not share the same cultural background or same racial origins. The other-mother and surrogate daughter pair thus forms a relational bond which brings those two distinct cultures together, in a union that is non-violent. The special contact of cultures they showcase is then seen to challenge the reality of a violent coming-together of cultures that characterized the New World experience. Last, Sorrow, a 'mongrelized' girl not bought but accepted in the household, showcases another feature of motherhood Toni Morrison favors in her novels which demonstrates its purely corporeal elements. Sorrow is disregarded and scorned by almost every other character in the book. She is an almost non-existent figure, who is said to bring bad

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<sup>120</sup> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*. (London: Vintage Books, 2009) 164.



luck. Yet despite her underprivileged social status she is able to form an identity of her own when she becomes a mother. Once she is able to maintain a pregnancy, she manages her childbirth in the open and inevitably, she becomes the most complete and the freest among the female inhabitants.

The women inhabiting the household of the Vaarks are defined in terms of their relation to motherhood, as well as towards each other. Rebekka, the white mistress, suffers the loss of her husband and children. Their deaths leave her without hope and result in her isolation. Her despair makes her distance herself from her servants, who are the only community of people that is left for her. Indeed, the loss of her children carries symbolic dimensions since she loses the status of a mother. For a woman who belongs to a white patriarchal society the severing of her husband's familial line makes her even more vulnerable than her living in the wilderness presents. In his *Poetics of Relation*, Edward Glissant speaks of Western societies in which filiation equals legitimacy. That is, if the Vaark household community had a legitimate heir from Rebekka, it would guarantee that the domineering filial relationship in this reduced community would be the one initiated by her. As a result, the rest of the women, whether mothers or not, would be established as subordinate to this familial line. Once Rebekka loses the prerogative of motherhood, she loses the authority of the household as well.

Opposed to the notion of filiation of Western cultures is the reality of the Caribbean. 'The terra incognita [that is the Caribbean space] (...) is an inexhaustible sphere of variations born of the contact among cultures.'<sup>121</sup> The violence of filiation according to Glissant is counteracted by a Poetics of Relation. Glissant's Relation is the notion

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<sup>121</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Transl. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor; U of Michigan P, 2010) 57.

that where cultures come into contact, identity formation is possible in terms of ‘polyrootedness, contact and connection.’<sup>122</sup> The world of *A Mercy* is, essentially, a Caribbean space because its symbolic family is created, not on the basis of a biological family line, but through the connection and role formation of its multi-cultural members. Rebekka, Lina, Florens and Sorrow, each have a different racial and cultural background. Although they meet because of white colonization, none finally dominates the others.

Benitez-Rojo has spoken of the Caribbean as an archipelago in which ‘one can sense the features of an island that “repeats” itself,’<sup>123</sup> to argue that although there is not uniformity to be found in this multi-cultural space, there are repetitions which confirm the distinct character of the area. In this sense, the women of *A Mercy* form such a multi-cultural space in which mothering can be seen as a dynamic that is repeated despite and against the violence of domination. Although existing in a time of slavery and indentured labour, the community of the Vaark household is a New World experiment, an experiment shown to be frail enough because of its novelty. As a result, the women of *A Mercy* do not form a consciousness of community/family. Each experiences her situation differently, and each resorts to some form of mothering to achieve connectedness. Morrison describes those instances of mothering and at the same time, manages to incorporate them in a historical account of colonization on American soil.

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<sup>122</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 176.

<sup>123</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham and London; Duke University Press, 1996) 3.

## 5.1 The Maternal Voice

Paula G. Eckard argues that ‘while historians have collected considerable information about the external lives of female slaves, less is known about the actual feelings of slave mothers.’<sup>124</sup> The silencing of slave mothers, which complements the general absence of maternal subjectivity in Western literature, is compensated in *A Mercy*, as it is in *Beloved*, by giving the slave mother a voice. Florens’ mother concludes the narrative to establish the primacy of a mother-to-daughter convergence, and the urgency of a mother to guide the child she has freed. She is given narrative space to both recount her experience and voice her reasons why she had to give up on her own daughter. As was the case with Sethe, she attempts to justify her act and she feels she is accountable to her daughter only. The narrative voice she is given, she uses to phrase what seems like a plea for forgiveness. At the same time, her message has the clear purpose to guide and give her what seems the most urgent kind of knowledge under the circumstances: ‘In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae.’<sup>125</sup>

Historical records of slavery in the US before the Civil War attest to slave mothers who ‘motivated their children to run away.’<sup>126</sup> Florens’ mother, however, except for seeking ways to free her daughter because she is convinced that a female slave’s life

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<sup>124</sup> Eckard, 22.

<sup>125</sup> *A Mercy*, 165.

<sup>126</sup> Wilma King, “Suffer them Till Death: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 161.

in the D'Ortega plantation holds greater danger than her little boy's, has prepared her children's emancipation even sooner. Having found a reverend who was willing to take the risk, she secured his teaching them all how to read and write. 'I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way. Reverend Father was full of kindness and bravery (...). He believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don't know that. What I know is there is magic in learning.'<sup>127</sup> Toni Morrison gives the slave family the authority of literacy which is a power granted by the decisiveness of the slave mother.

Florens's carving letters on the floor for the blacksmith to see is an act of story-telling. 'I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this.'<sup>128</sup> Once Florens realizes the blacksmith cannot read, she decides the letters need to become ash, and the house to be burnt down. In this way, she erases her story, which tells of her enslaved past. 'Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. (...) Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves fire more (...) Hear me? Slave. Free. I last.'<sup>129</sup> At this point, Florens uses the power of the written word to tell her story and the process of writing results in her liberation from a deliberate enslavement. The lesson she had to be taught, the knowledge her mother had wished for her to acquire, is made possible because of the story-telling. It is after writing her story down that she realizes she has to free herself, and she is able to do so, thanks to her mother's insistence to learn how to write.

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<sup>127</sup> *A Mercy*, 161.

<sup>128</sup> *A Mercy*, 158.

<sup>129</sup> *A Mercy*, 158-9.

Florens becomes thus one of the two female characters of *A Mercy* who become emancipated—the other being Sorrow. In discussing *Sula*, Toni Morrison speaks of her intention that the characters acquire knowledge: ‘a lot of people complain about my endings, because it looks like they are falling apart. But something important has happened; some knowledge is there (...). There is a resolution of a sort but there are always possibilities-choices, just knowing what those choices are or being able to make a commitment about those choices or knowing something.’<sup>130</sup> In agreement with Morrison’s professed objective, characters like Florens do reach a certain kind of knowledge and become wiser at the course of the narrative. Both Florens and Sorrow gain awareness of themselves and their situation, they acquire subjectivity, and are able to take decisions to better their circumstances.

However, Florens goes a long way to arrive to such knowledge of herself. For her, the separation from her mother is a traumatizing event. Eckhard writes that mothers who abandon their children do have such an effect on children. Some ‘mothers in Morrison’s texts are (...) defined by their absence, leaving behind orphaned and abandoned children scarred for a lifetime (...). The absent mother continues to affect characters, events, and entire texts from the recesses of the past. (...). Losing the mother often represents the loss of childhood, and in Morrison’s fiction, “orphans” not only lose their own childhoods but deny those of the next generation as well.’<sup>131</sup> Florens admits that ‘mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand.’<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 177.

<sup>131</sup> Eckard, 36.

<sup>132</sup> *A Mercy*, 6.

Florens thus feels rejected by her mother. The moment of her mother's choosing which child to give away is imprinted on her and returns as a haunting image. In reality, this image seems not only to haunt, but also to guide her. When in the blacksmith's cabin, alone with his child, Florens sees her mother again. 'A minha mae leans at the door holding her little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell me something.'<sup>133</sup>

Florens traumatic separation from her mother results in her neediness. She is described as someone who possesses a 'combination of defenselessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, a willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others.'<sup>134</sup> In those lines, Scully shows Florens to be the perfect victim, and in constant need of approval. This quality however, gains the love and attention of Lina once Florens enters the household. Adrienne Rich argues that 'the woman who has felt unmothered may seek mothers all her life—may even seek them in men.'<sup>135</sup> Although Florens finds in Lina a perfect mother-figure to foster her emotional needs, she cannot give up the image of her real mother. Morrison chooses to portray their relationship as one which is based on memory. Memory is important in post-slavery literatures as it is associated with the historical memory of slavery. As abandoned as Florens might feel then, the memory of her mother stays with her.

First, Morrison shows how Florens's mother succeeds in freeing her daughter, albeit offering her to another, but gentler master. Additionally, she maintains the mother-daughter bond, to depict its resilience to the force that ruptured it in the first place. By means of the memory both Florens and her mother keep of each other, this bond is

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<sup>133</sup> *A Mercy*, 135.

<sup>134</sup> *A Mercy*, 150.

<sup>135</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Ltd, 1977) 242.

preserved. In addition, Morrison uses the voice of the mother to give a powerful account of the experience of African American slavery. Florens' mother is granted a narrative of her own to recount the journey from Africa, to Barbados and finally to the plantation of the D'Ortegas, to speak of the women who preferred suicide than continue their journey, of the sexual harassment female slaves suffered, and of the reduction of their cultural identity to the identity of a person defined merely by the color of their skin. Her narrative made possible as thought aimed at her daughter is close to Glissant's notion of thought: 'Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never retain.'<sup>136</sup> Morrison has used instead the term of re-memory: 'repetition + memory, not simply a recollection of the past but its return, its re-presentation.'<sup>137</sup> Both Florens and her mother are seen to think and address each other in an act of re-memory, and thus, make use of their past constructively.

Rushdy further explains the term re-memory used by Morrison as 'the concept of mental recollection, both anamnesis and construction, that is never only personal but always interpersonal.'<sup>138</sup> Having said that, it seems that by placing Florens' recollection and thoughts next to her mother's, their mutual re-memories are able to converge. In the narrative form of *A Mercy*, those two voices—thoughts aimed at one another—show a magical possibility of reaching their target. That is, for the reader of the novel, mother and daughter are able to come together, one's knowledge possible to reach the other's mind.

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<sup>136</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Transl. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor; U of Michigan P, 2010) 1.

<sup>137</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "Mothers and Daughters" in *Signs*, Volume 7, 1981, 107.

<sup>138</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels" in *Contemporary Literature*, Volume 31, 1990, 304.

Maternal voice in *A Mercy* proves the primacy of the mother. Hence, Florens is in need of a mother who will guide and give her the prerogative of language. It is interesting how in a patriarchal society language is associated with the male and the paternal, whereas the expression ‘mother-tongue’ is used across different cultures. Giving mothers voice, and as a result, subjectivity, Morrison’s novels show how the maternal dynamic involves native knowledge, a knowledge which is passed on to the next generation.

## **5.2 Other-Mothering: a Cultural Métissage**

In the house of *A Mercy* a very prominent mother figure is Lina. Her native American ancestry is one more instance of the cultural métissage that is taking place, and which is not restricted to the African-American and European cultures. One case of a cultural encounter is Lina’s taking up a motherly function towards Florens. Another consists of Lina’s position as a servant. Her working in the house is characterized by devotion towards Rebekka and Jacob, and makes it possible to speak of a woman who does a lot more than serve her white masters. The meeting of cultures in the Americas was a result of violence, of African Americans being brought to the New World by force, of Native Americans being slaughtered by European settlers. In addition, it was a result of their subsequent relationship of a master and a slave. Lina’s place in the novel is important because what she offers in the household is a lot more than manual work. Except being clearly a mother figure for Florens, she brings the cultural knowledge needed for the community to survive, and offers encouragement and companionship to Rebekka. In other words, she is the person who keeps this fragile community together.



When Florens is first brought by Jacob Vaark she is a child separated by its mother. ‘Lina had fallen in love with her right away as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks (...). Some how, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew (...) she wanted to protect her.’<sup>139</sup> Florens is a daughter, who, having lost her own mother is eager to receive the care and attention of another woman. Lina explains their instant and mutual fondness for one another as mother hunger: ‘Mother hunger – to be one or to have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone.’<sup>140</sup> Lina has lost her mother and will not become one, due to her traumatic experience with men, and so the inherent want for nurture and protection, but also of mutual belonging to another person, is expressed on Florens. As much as a child then is seen to be lacking when deprived of mothering, so does a woman grow needful of mothering when encountering an orphaned child.

Lina’s ability to offer valuable knowledge is demonstrated in her story-telling. The myth of a mother eagle protecting her little ones must have been retrieved from the mythology of Lina’s tribe. This particular story is the one most favored by Florens. Lina resorts to native knowledge on several occasions, but most of all when brought to the house by Jacob Vaark. ‘Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world (...) Solitude would have crushed her had she not fallen into hermit skills.’<sup>141</sup> In fact, Lina manages the household even before Rebekka arrives, and this gives her greater status than her position of a servant would allow us to think. In the

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<sup>139</sup> *A Mercy*, 58.

<sup>140</sup> *A Mercy*, 61.

<sup>141</sup> *A Mercy*, 46.

course of the narrative, it is Lina who helps Rebekka find her way with chores, who takes care of her when Rebekka falls ill, who orders Florens and Sorrow to do tasks and reprimands them if they do not do well.

Most of all, it is Lina who gives Rebekka consolation when the last of her children dies. ‘At dawn in a light snowfall Lina came and arranged jewelry and food on the grave, along with scented leaves, telling her that the boys and Patrician were stars now, or something equally lovely: yellow and green birds, playful foxes or the rose-tinted clouds collecting at the edge of the sky.’<sup>142</sup> Rich speaks of ‘childless women’ and argues that ‘Many of the great mothers have not been biological (...). We are none of us, “either” mothers or daughters; (...) we are both. Women, mothers or not, who feel committed to other women, are increasingly giving each other a quality of caring filled with the diffuse kinds of identification that exist between actual mothers and daughters.’<sup>143</sup> Lina’s mothering qualities take shape not only in her relation to Florens, but in the relationship between her and Rebekka. Rebekka is after all an isolated mother who, although deliberately, is cut off from her past. Most importantly, she does not have the guidance a family would have given her to manage her marriage, the household, or her children’s illnesses. Lina’s devotion involves sharing cultural knowledge with Rebekka. That is, in a reversal of European cultures being imposed on indigenous people, Native American traditions and beliefs are seen to have an effect on the lives of Europeans, and what is more, without the aim to impose or exploit.

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<sup>142</sup> *A Mercy*, 78.

<sup>143</sup> Rich, 252-3

### 5.3 Sorrow: Making Oneself Complete

Sorrow is an enigmatic character, since there is nothing known about her when she is found and saved by the sawyer. She does not provide a family history, a name, or the memory of her past life. As enigmatic as she is to the people that form her society in *A Mercy*, so is the unanimous contempt the rest of the household treats her with. Sorrow is said to be ‘mongrelized’ which might be one of the reasons why she is a *persona non grata*, unwelcomed and unwanted in the household. Perhaps the fact she is a hybrid species for them, results in being difficult to be categorized by the rest. She is half a child, half a woman, as well as half-white. When it comes to her own understanding of herself, she constitutes the one half of a pair that make up her identity. She wanders at night, an activity brought to an end once she gives birth to her daughter.

It could be said that Sorrow is a representative of a nomadism that is anti-conformist, the way Glissant has spoken of it: ‘this is the nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, (...), all of whom are driven by some specific need to move, in which daring or aggression play no part. Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.’<sup>144</sup> Although Sorrow is on her own, her story is a story of such wandering. The same way Florens can be said to represent the history of African Americans brought to the US as slaves, Sorrow can stand for a characteristically peaceful sort of relocation that characterizes certain Caribbean tribes, but also nomadic peoples around the world. This movement and especially its peaceful nature is important to note, since it comes in clear contrast to the aggressive movement westward from European colonizers, as well as the violent dislocation of Africans from their native land to the New World.

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<sup>144</sup> Glissant, 12.

Having said this, Sorrow is a person that belongs to a kind of people that is not only non-violent, but moreover, seems impervious to the coercive structures of the colonizer culture she finds herself in. She is not defined by the name of a father, or her work for a white mistress as she is said to be hopeless with chores. She is not fully understood as a servant then, since she does not engage a lot in house chores, and is not a slave either, primarily because she is not bought by Vaark. Thus, she resists authority and a definition imposed by others, challenges the idea of race, challenges power altogether. She has never known roots, since she was born and has grown up on a ship, but that does not cancel her need for rootedness. Sorrow finds rootedness and completeness after the birth of her daughter. ‘Sorrow’s wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs, impervious to the complaints of others. She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. “I am your mother,” she said. “My name is Complete.”’<sup>145</sup>

Yi-Lin Yu analyzes Kristeva’s notion of the maternal in the essay ‘Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini’ and explains how ‘inside the maternal body, which embodies the self and the other, the mother becomes her own subject while the child is seen as the other. Kristeva’s celebration of women’s bodily experience of motherhood offers a different relation to the other, not the one prescribed by patriarchal law.’<sup>146</sup> Twin disappears immediately after Sorrow’s giving birth, and the

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<sup>145</sup> *A Mercy*, 132.

<sup>146</sup> Yi-Lin Yu, *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005) 43.

daughter born makes her mother acquire an understanding of herself that is self-sufficient, complete. All in all, she has been free from the beginning, acts on her own will, and does not ever submit to authority. Sorrow's 'unblinking eyes, smoke gray, were not blank, but waiting. It was that lying-in-wait look that troubled Lina. (...). Her privacy protected her; her easy coupling a present to herself. When pregnant, she glowed and when her time came she sought help in exactly the right place from the right people.'<sup>147</sup> The experience of motherhood is then realized in Sorrow more as a reward, and helps her towards the self-definition of mother.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

A *Mercy* women are seen to experience motherhood in its multiple formations and to react to this experience according to their specific situation. To go back to the idea of motherhood viewed as a repeated dynamic in Toni Morrison's fiction, instances of motherhood can be said to be acts of empowerment and emancipation. This is due to the resilience of the mother bond, despite the unfavorable circumstances those women find themselves in. Their experience of motherhood brings them a sense of emancipation as it seems to defy the coercive structures imposed on them. That is, Florens' mother does what she thinks best for her daughter, Lina is able to nurture an unfortunate orphan like Florens, and Sorrow finds completeness through motherhood, despite the fact she is despised and unwanted by the figures representing authority in the household.

Women then do not reproduce the subjugation and possessiveness they undergo, but retreat to their life-giving and affectionate roles as mothers. They might have to be

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<sup>147</sup> *A Mercy*, 150.

separated from their children, as was the case of Florens' mother, but they do what they think is best for their well-being. On the other hand, Rebekka's experience of motherhood does not share the same qualities. Her impotency to maintain a motherly status is a comment on the patriarchal, master class she belongs to. As a woman of a patriarchal and coercive society, she is unable to recover from her children's loss. Lina for instance, although deprived of biological motherhood, directs her motherly instincts towards Florens which turns beneficial for Florens. As a woman subjugated under patriarchal laws but with the illusion of authority, Rebekka cannot find consolation since her authority is authority given. When she resorts to the religion she had previously rejected she does not find real support either. On the contrary, the rest of the women, although helped by others, earn their freedom and their empowerment on their own. Sorrow, Lina, and Florens' situation is different because they have initially either benefited from the care of a mother, or because they have offered their mothering capacities for the well-being of another human being. This in turn empowers them first, and subsequently, those under their protection.

Overall, Toni Morrison shows that the maternal is a lot more than a bodily experience, and that its emancipating potential persists even in enslaved conditions. *A Mercy* equates motherhood with freedom and empowerment and shows how those qualities, vividly portrayed through the mother figures under study, have been potentialities that will be challenged under the relentless imposition of colonization and slavery in years subsequent to the narrative time of the novel.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

My intention to discuss motherhood as depicted in Toni Morrison's novels was to prove motherhood's empowering potential. That is why the context of slavery or the presence of slavery legacies after its legal abolition, provide a necessary background in order to identify the kind of motherhood Morrison advocates. I chose to employ theoretical works which examine the reality of cultures which share a fairly recent slavery past; works which moreover understand the outcome of such a past as a multi-cultural potential yet to be utilized. The French-Caribbean writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant has analyzed the reality of the Caribbean as a literal and metaphorical space which can be used as a paradigm of multiplicity and relation, despite its history of violence due to colonization and slavery. Glissant coins the term 'poetics of relation' to explain a creative, poetic interpretation of history and to create the notion of a relational identity, as opposed to identity formed in isolation. Glissant's definition of the Caribbean as such a metaphorical space is a useful parameter in the analysis of Toni Morrison's novels, as it extends to a wider area which includes the US, and especially the US South.

Toni Morrison's portrayal of women as mothers, or other-mothers, shares a lot with the non-violent nature of the Caribbean in Glissant and is used against coercive structures imposed by a system of colonization, slavery, or patriarchy. Her understanding of female nature, exemplified best through its mothering potential, is one which is self-sufficient although relational, nurturing although not self-sacrificing, creative and non-violent although sometimes, uncontrollably forceful. It is important to discuss the motherhood she speaks of having in mind the social conditions and the historical time of each narrative and to see how motherhood is, on the contrary, an ahistorical event that defies systems of domination. Moreover,

through mother figures found in her work, Morrison is able to negotiate a slavery past and to provide its imaginative re-writing.

The term postslavery I use throughout the thesis was coined by George B. Handley to describe narratives which ‘although written after the demise of slavery, return to slavery’s past in a genealogical exploration of its deep, historical roots in order to understand its relationship to the present.’<sup>148</sup> Handley contends that how we choose to remember historical events is equally important with the events themselves.<sup>149</sup> In Chapter 3 I thus analyze *Song of Solomon* as such a narrative. Its central mother figure Pilate exhibits mothering qualities on the basis of a non-biological motherhood that equals spiritual nurturance by providing a connection to a cultural, communal past. That is, I attempt to show how Pilate, one of the two orphaned members of a family severed by postslavery practices, manages to form an identity that is self-sufficient. How she makes productive use of her past instead of being entrapped by it, and bases her knowledge on lived experiences. And how as a result, she can be independent of the social and economic system she finds herself in and able to assume the role of a genuine, spiritual other-mother for her nephew Milkman.

In Chapter 4 *Beloved* is situated in the context of institutionalized African-American slavery. I interpret Sethe as a mother figure who equals motherhood with freedom, as Sethe struggles to ensure that her children will not live in captivity. Sethe’s mothering, as complex as it may be due to her committing infanticide, rests nevertheless on the prerogative of self-definition. Sethe does not only commit infanticide, but claims the right to act the way she reckons is best for her children. In addition, a re-writing of history is made possible through Sethe and her two

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<sup>148</sup> George B. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White*, Ed. A. James Arnold (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 3.

<sup>149</sup> Handley, 3.



daughters: one stands for the communal past re-embodied and re-lived to be understood, the other for its hopeful future. Motherhood portrayed in *Beloved* is to a great extent a bodily experience; through the mother and daughter bodies history is re-written.

Chapter 5 contends that *A Mercy* mothers exhibit mothering qualities variously. The familiar patterns found in Toni Morrison's fiction are here given equal share, as there is not one central mother figure. Thus there is the African-American enslaved mother who offers her daughter freedom and the knowledge of the responsibility of such freedom. Next, the other-mother Lina who fosters the needs of the orphaned child Florens and who, in the multi-cultural context of the book, offers Native American knowledge to a child of a different cultural and racial descent. In doing so, she defies the overwhelming principle of violence, inherent in the meeting of cultures in systems of colonization and slavery. Finally, I argue that corporeal experiences of motherhood are present in *A Mercy* with the mother figure of Sorrow to signify the self-sufficiency of a mother, and the completeness she experiences in relation to an Other that is also part of her. Essential maternal experiences such as childbirth are described in Morrison from the mother's point of view and thus, challenge a male-written experience of motherhood.

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## 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

## Resumé

Tato práce uvádí, že mateřství, jak je znázorněno v románech Toni Morrisonové *Šalomounova píseň* (*Song of Solomon*), *Milovaná* (*Beloved*) a *Milosrdenství* (*A Mercy*) je prostor pro posílení postavení žen. Jeho emancipační potenciál je nastaven proti kontextu otroctví a patriarchátu popsané v příbězích a ukazuje, jak matky jsou schopné odolávat represivním strukturám a zajistit svým dětem blaho. Otroctví potrhalo rodinné vazby a způsobilo rozdělení rodin, oddělením rodičů od svých dětí. V románech, které jsou předmětem této práce je obnovy rodinných vazeb docíleno na základě imaginárního přepisování dějin. Některé z postav matek, jako je například postava Sethe v románu *Beloved* (*Milovaná*), znovu prožívají bolestnou rodinnou minulost a musí se vypořádat s jejími traumatizujícími účinky, aby mohly jít dále. Jiné z postav, jako je například postava Pilate v románu *Song of Solomon* (*Šalomounova píseň*), se vrací ke své minulosti a fungují jako prostředníci mezi dřívějšími a novými členy komunity. Přepisování historie je pro afroamerické spisovatele a lidi, kteří v minulosti zažili otrokářské praktiky, zcela zásadní k tomu, aby se mohli vypořádat s odkazem minulosti.

Mateřství je definováno v několika stále se opakujících vzorech. Toni Morrisonová popisuje fyzické aspekty mateřství z pohledu matky a používá ženské tělo jako životodárný zdroj, který zrušuje objektifikaci ženských otročských těl. Kromě toho, je v souladu s africkou tradicí mateřství ve kterém ženy pečují o všechny děti komunity, ne jen o své vlastní. Zdůrazňuje též roli ženy, která nabízí cenné znalosti a duševní sílu pro členy své komunity s cílem pomoci jim vyrovnat se s nepřátelskými ekonomickými a sociálními podmínkami.

Toni Morrisonová podporuje rozmanité zastoupení mateřství prostřednictvím různých matek, které se nachází v jejích textech. Přitom její romány zobrazují svět, ve kterém převládá ženská přirozenost - silná, kreativní a soucitná - a přesto v některých případech ohromující. Autorka se zaměřuje na popis ženských bytostí jako matek a tím tvoří povídky ženského charakteru, které jsou charakterizovány samostatností a regenerací. Ženské postavy vychází z prožitých zkušeností a v románech je vytvářen paralelní prostor, který se nenechává strhnout vnějšími a vnucenými definicemi ženského charakteru. Ženský charakter je popisován jako zdroj otevřenosti a plodnosti a je přirovnáván k multikulturnímu prostředí Karibiku. Karibik se svými regeneračními schopnostmi, které vytváří nové, hybridní kultury, je symbolizován jako ženské lůno. Tato práce považuje jak kultury vzniklé otroctvím, tak vlastní ženský charakter mající nepoznaný a naplno nevyužívaný potenciál.

Klíčová slova: Morrison, mateřství, posílení, afro-americký, Karibik, otroctví, ženská přirozenost