

Toni Morrison's Politics of Feminist Mothering and European Literary Tradition: Discerning Feminist Matricentric Streaks in Morrison's Work

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Abstract

This research investigates Morrison's novels, Sula and The Bluest Eye and challenges the patriarchal definition of motherhood presented in the dominant European literature. The article deals with the Morrison theory on mothering to explore the experiences of black marginalized mothers that were absent in the white European patriarchal narratives on the motherhood. Drawing on Patricia Hills Collin's concept of Black feminist Motherhood and Andrea O'Reilly's theories on feminist mothering, the study will investigate the impact of Morrison's works that deconstruct the patriarchal discourse in western writings. Morrison's novels playing a viable role in liberating mothering experience from suppression to rather intellectual and emotional development. This kind of mothering empowerment became a political and social act. The research follows the narrative approach and techniques of content analysis.

Keywords: Black mothers, Feminism, subjugation, Eurocentric feminist narratives, patriarchal mothering, Gender, Race.

Introduction

This article investigates the patriarchal definition of motherhood present in the dominant patriarchal European literary tradition and explores mothering from a feminist angle. Since 1970s, mainstream European literary narratives on motherhood promote the patriarchal concept of motherhood and usually highlight and represent mainly the ideas and problems of white middle-class

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mothers. Since 1986, little had been published in feminist theory in general and European feminists' literary theory in particular on the theme of mothering-motherhood, and what had been documented tended to reenact white patriarchal marginalization of motherhood. Investigating the idea of absent mothers within the euro-centric literary fictional narratives, enables Morrison to come up with her alternative theory of feminist mothering. Her theory on mothering explores the experiences of black marginalized mothers that are absent in the white European patriarchal narratives on the topic of motherhood. Drawing on Patricia Hills Collin's concept of Black feminist Motherhood and Andrea O'Reilly's theories on feminist mothering. It is investigated how Morrison's novels deconstruct those controlling patriarchal images that are used to marginalize black mothers. Morrison's novels give a more liberating definition by defining mothering as an experience that does not stifle a mother's creativity but rather provides her with an opportunity for intellectual and emotional development. This kind of mothering empowers marginalized mothers and provides them with the power to determine the condition under which they would like to mother their children. Morrison's novels, *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* depict how in both in Afro-American context and the western patriarchal context, mothering becomes a political act. By bringing up their children, black mothers teach them different survival strategies and ways to resist subjugation.

Morrison's theory of feminist mothering is quite useful in defining her larger political and philosophical stance on motherhood. The strong black mothers in her novels teach their daughters and sons different survival strategies that enable them to cultivate an authentic black identity. Through the institution of mothering, black mothers help to heal black children's emotional and psychological wounds and prevent them from turning into psychologically wounded adults. In both novels, *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison portrays two kinds of black mothers; Pauline Breedlove and Eva. Pauline Breedlove is a dysfunctional mother who wants confirmation and approval of her ways of mothering from her racist surroundings, and unlike Eva accepts the patriarchal definition of motherhood. While Eva is a strong black mother who refuses to suppress her individuality and deconstructs the dominant patriarchal discourse on mothering. Mothering in Morrison's novels appears more of a political act rather than an individual matter. In both novels, *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents both strong and weak kinds of black mothers, to compare and contrast two different kinds of mothering. Thus, these novels document the deep psychological impacts of two different

types of mothering can have upon black children. For Eva, unlike Pauline, mothering is a political act which is useful in helping her children to develop a positive sense of self.

In *Sula*, Morrison highlights the difficulty that a black mother experiences in a racist society that wants her to follow certain patriarchal concepts regarding motherhood.

Eva is not a conventional mother and refuses to follow the stereotypical model of black motherhood that demands her to mother her children at the expense of her individuality. Thus, *Sula* is unable to understand the kind of love both her mother, Hannah Peace and grandmother Eva offer because of internalizing the white racist ideology. By not getting the conventional love from Hannah Peace and Eva, Sula discards her mother line in despair.

Hannah peace and Eva are often labelled as dysfunctional mothers; their flawed mothering is considered the main reason behind Sula's disconnection from her mother line.

European Literary Narratives: On Morrison and the idea of Absent Mother

Di Brandt rightly observes that the figure of a mother has been “largely absent” in the dominant European literary narratives on the concept of motherhood.¹ By further emphasizing her point, she points out the reason behind this absence is not because a mother's experiences are not worth mentioning but “her subjectivity has been violently and repeatedly, suppressed”.² According to Andrea O'Reilly, both white and black marginalized mothers feel more at home in “Morrison's maternal world” and they also point out the blind spots of white patriarchal euro-centric thoughts on motherhood.³ As she postulates, “By 1988 when I first read Morrison, I was well versed in the seventies and eighties Anglo-American feminist thinking on motherhood and yet never felt a sense of belonging or connection with this body of knowledge”.⁴

¹ Di Brandt, *Wild Woman Dancing* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1993), 7.

² Ibid.

³ Andrea O'Reilly, Preface, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), x.

⁴ Ibid.

Most European narratives, particularly Anglo-American narratives on motherhood (1980-1990) are daughter-centric and approach the theme of motherhood the way it has been defined by Patriarchal culture. They view mothering as a private work, a work that lacks any political or cultural significance. Although Sara Ruddick and Adrienne Rich's works explore the notion of feminist mothering, both refuses to see mothering as a disempowered and oppressive experience. Morrison's novels explore the experience of mothering from all possible angles, she sees "mother work, mother love and the mother line as a political enterprise" with social implications.⁵

Justine Baillie describes Morrison as an inventor whose work helped to shape western theory and tradition.⁶ However, one cannot deny the influence of the literary, social and cultural European context on the development of her theory of feminist mothering. Thus, this article intends to investigate the development of Morrison's aesthetic in conjunction with the major developments in European literature and theory on mothering, as her works rely on some recurring underlying patterns and motifs that constantly bring her work into a constant dialogue with classical European narratives with matricentric streaks.

Referring Deleuze and Guattari, Baille explains that Morrison's alternative literary expressions allow her "the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility".⁷ Morrison manages to "express a marginal sensibility from within the canon", and thus her tendency to "use the master's tool to dismantle the master's house" aligns her with the projects of both feminist and minority artists.⁸

Thus, this article provides adequate space for a well-informed revision of some of the major literary debates in European literary tradition.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Justine Baillie, *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury Publications, 2013).

⁷ Ibid, 120.

⁸ Ibid.

Theoretical Framework

By utilizing insights from Patricia Hill Collins' concept of black feminist motherhood and O'Reilly's theories on both dysfunctional and feminist mothering. The investigation challenges the patriarchal concept of motherhood that dwells on the ideology of unconditional love. This concept is often promoted through certain stereotypes that are used to control black mothers.

Patricia Hill Collins rightly points out that since the 1970s, the mainstream feminist works on motherhood highlight only the ideas and problems that are usually experienced by white middle-class mothers. White feminist works on motherhood do not engage with the racial and class issues experienced by poor black mothers. Morrison's novels question the validity of stereotypical controlling images associated with poor black mothers. Eva as a mother is judged by the two prevalent "controlling images", as Collins argues, the first one is the most praised and glorified image of an ideal and selfless super strong mother while the second one is that of "irresponsible and dysfunctional mothers".⁹ Both images are highly judgmental and used to degrade and humiliate black mothers. The first type of controlling image is often promoted in the works of black male writers. Black mothers are glorified and represented as endowed with devotion, love and self-sacrifice.¹⁰ These stereotypes do not elevate the confident position of motherhood but misrepresent the whole concept. According to the patriarchal yardstick, it is demanded from Eva that she must place her demands and needs behind those of her daughters and son; she must negate herself and learn to live for the sake of her children. Eva as the progressive and intelligent black mother rejects both racially glorified definitions of motherhood. She empowers herself by embracing a more positively liberating definition of black mothering. Collins defines motherhood as "(an institution) where black women express and learn the power of self-definition", it also teaches them how they can value and respect themselves.¹¹ Emphasizing the necessity of self-confidence, Collins teaches black women the art of empowering themselves through smaller independent steps.

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 173.

¹⁰ Ibid, 173.

¹¹ Ibid, 174.

M(othering) in *Sula*

Eva is depicted as a strong black woman who is abandoned by her husband Boy and she has single handedly brought up her three children. After the abandonment, she took drastic steps to ensure the survival of her children during the miserable winter; she cuts off her legs to get the insurance that can help her to feed the children.

After the death of her daughter Hannah Peace, Eva begins to take care of her only granddaughter, Sula. Eva is a very unconventional mother and her way of mothering is misunderstood by the people around her. On one occasion she also jumped from a window to save the life of her daughter Hannah's life who was literally on fire. But both Hannah and Sula fail to give her the kind of acknowledgement that she deserves. She also takes the drastic step of killing her only son who was in constant pain because of his physical condition. Morrison defines the very act of killing as an act of motherly love because its sole purpose was to decrease the pain of his son. Eva also describes it as an act of pure love, as she confesses that she could not see her son's deterioration, "I have done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he couldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb but like a man".¹²

Andrea O'Reilly argues that Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience* tries to elaborate on the patriarchal concept of motherhood mainly explored in the mainstream narratives; it defines motherhood as a self-sacrificing experience. O'Reilly seems to call into question the patriarchal concept and tries to give an alternative perspective. She introduces the term mothering to refer to women's experiences that are female-oriented and potentially empowering.¹³ Eva's mothers Sula in a unique way, while Sula internalizes the so-called stereotypical image of an ideal mother promoted by the racist society. Thus, Sula, most of the time appears clueless and is incapable of understanding her grandmother's way of mothering. Interestingly she fails to understand her mother's remarks about herself too that she loves Sula but does not like her. This misinterpretation becomes responsible for her disconnection from her mother's line. Sula could not interpret her mother's remarks in a positive

¹² Toni Morrison. *Sula*. (London: Vintage Press, 1998), 78.

¹³ Andrea O'Reilly, "Introduction", *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 2.

light and found them too judgmental. She judges her mother's way of mothering according to the normative concept of motherhood. After alienating herself from her mother line, she becomes more directionless regarding her future. According to Trudier Harris, Sula like an active destructive artist, in the absence of colours, finds escape in sex.¹⁴

Throughout the novel, Sula develops an extreme dislike for the traditional concept of a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother. Consequently, she finds little breathing space for herself in a conventional Afro-American community, as her mother wants her to get married, but she replies, "I want to make somebody else. I want to make myself".¹⁵ Unlike an obedient Afro-American daughter, she shows a very callous and ruthless attitude towards her grandmother by refusing to keep her in her house. Eva had sacrificed her leg for the sake of her children but she is often mocked by Sula in the following way, "You sold your life for twenty-three dollars a month".¹⁶

She also threatens her time and again, "who knows... You may make the bright flame of all".¹⁷ To save herself from Sula's wrath, Eva eventually develops a habit of locking herself in a room. But even in April, "two men came with a stretcher", and "she didn't comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas".¹⁸ Similarly, her daughter misunderstands her love. Hannah once asked Eva this question, "mama did you ever love us?".¹⁹ In response, she replies, "you setting, here with healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you?" ... The big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't".²⁰ For a black mother, fulfilling the material needs of her children is the most important issue, but Hannah cannot comprehend the answer and asks, "I was talking about something else. Like, like, playing with us? Did you ever, you know, play with us?".²¹

Hannah's perception of Eva does not match with what O'Reilly describes as the concept of a "happy house maker", "the stay-at-home mom and apple

¹⁴ Trudier Harris, "Sula", in *Toni Morrison's Sula: Modern Critical Interpretation*, edited by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publications, 1999), 107.

¹⁵ Toni Morrison. *Sula* (London: Vintage Press, 1998), 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 93-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 68.

²¹ *Ibid*.

pie" notion of motherhood, which has become the dominant social ideology during the post-World War II era.²² Therefore, Hannah fails to understand her mother's sacrifices. The stereotypical patriarchal notion of motherhood promotes the concept of a self-sacrificing mother who also lacks the power to decide under which circumstances she may mother her children. This perspective refuses to see the mother as an individual.

The famous feminist writer Sharon Hays uses the term "intensive mothering" for patriarchal mothering in *The Cultural Contradiction of Motherhood*. Hays concludes that intensive mothering can be defined by three characteristics, the first represents the mother as "the central caregiver", the second "mothering requires the copious amount of time, energy, and material resources for the child" and the third views motherhood as the most important thing that can happen to a woman's life, even more, important than paid work.²³ Hays defines this concept of mothering as intensive mothering which is "child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally-absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive".²⁴ According to this yardstick, Eva labels Hannah as a bad mother who refuses to provide intensive care to her children.

Marie Negro observes in her article 'In Search of Self' that Sula feels like an outsider in the Medallion community. Sula decides to create her path for herself even with no direction.²⁵ Thus, the quest for a meaningful identity becomes more painful for her. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Sula's unstable relationship with her mother line further complicates her identity quest.²⁶ Although few critics consider Eva and Hannah's dysfunctional mothering responsible for Eva's destruction, Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems argue that no role model of a good mother was available before Sula and she considers both her grandmother and mother responsible for her destruction. Samuels and Hudson-Weems also criticize Hannah for delivering hurtful words about Sula, as Hannah once

²² Andrea O'Reilly, "Introduction", 5.

²³ Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradiction of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Marie Negro, "In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," in *Modern Critical Interpretation: Toni Morrison's Sula*, 23.

²⁶ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Order and Disorder in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, no. 1 (1977): 112-110.

tells her that she loves her as a daughter but dislikes her as a person.²⁷ Considering these remarks as the sole reason behind Sula's downfall is like blindly sticking to the daughter-centric perception. The daughter-centric, intensive mothering is discussed in detail in the literature. O'Reilly argues that except in Rich and Ruddick's writings, Anglo - white feminist literature is "daughter-centric and supports the institution of motherhood by patriarchal language".²⁸ Di Brandt also argues that the mother is almost absent in western literature, her experiences are not considered worth mentioning and her "subjectivity has also been violently and repeatedly suppressed".²⁹ Morrison's mothers, particularly Hannah and Eva do not fit into the patriarchal definition of a good mother who must love her children unconditionally. With her brutally honest remarks, Hannah challenges this patriarchal notion that a good mother must love her daughter's both good and bad characteristics. Through Eva and Hannah's characters, Morrison challenges the stereotypical concept of patriarchal motherhood. Even in an interview, Morrison seems to endorse Hannah's remarks about her daughter, by calling it an honest statement.

Sula is also responsible for her tragic circumstances, as she fails to make a significant connection with her mother line. O'Reilly rightly points out that "she has cut herself off from any responsibility to anyone other than herself", after discarding her mother line, she is left with "no self to count on either. She had no centre, no speck around which to grow".³⁰ Brenda O Day and T. Reddy also criticize the daughter-centric perspective on the institution of motherhood that is completely uninterested in women's subjectivity.³¹

Sula fully endorses the patriarchal concept of mother's love that sticks to the ideology of unconditional love. Thus, she rejects her mother line and aspires for a positive identity, whose impossible quest further alienates her from her maternal roots.

²⁷ Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Toni Morrison* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 36.

²⁸ Andrea O'Reilly, "Introduction", *From Motherhood*, ix.

²⁹ Di Brandt. *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1993.

³⁰ O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering*, 4

³¹ Brenda O Daly., and Maureen T. Reddy, eds. *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

The Bluest Eye: The Concept of Mothering

Drawing on O'Reilly's theories on both dysfunctional and feminist mothering. The analysis is focused on under what circumstances mothering does not remain a site of power or empowerment for Afro-American children.

The novel revolves around the life of an Afro-American child, Pecola Breedlove, whose house is burned down by her unstable and abusive father. Her life is observed by nine-year-old Claudia MacTeer, as she is a temporary foster child in their house. Her life events are narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator. Pecola Breedlove is the daughter of Pauline Breedlove, who has assimilated herself into the value system of the dominant culture and, as a result, her link with the Afro-American community is weakened and her way of mothering also loses a sense of empowerment. Leaving the South and coming to the North proves to be a fatal decision for the Breedlove family, as the South used to help them to be in touch with the value system of the Afro-American community. In the novel, the North appears to be a wasteland where the Breedlove family cannot grow both emotionally and spiritually. They experience an acute sense of loss and also find themselves robbed of a positive sense of self. Pauline's sense of alienation is quite visible from her very act of taking pride in working as a Mammy in a white family.

As the narrative voice narrates her experience in the following way, "The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her when she spoke for the Fishers... Power, praise and luxury were hers in this household".³² By doing so, she earns the title of a good servant in the house.

Through the story of Dick and Jane, the white children who live in a beautiful house and are being portrayed as a symbol of white privilege in the advertisement, Morrison depicts the prevailing racism in white society. This kind of idealistic representation of a white family in the media comes in contrast with the actual living conditions of Afro-American communities. Therefore, these prevailing images in the mainstream media completely disturb Pecola. Knowing that she would not be able to achieve this lifestyle makes her suffer from the worst kind of inferiority complex.

³² Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Plume Book Press), 128.

Pauline cannot fight the stereotypical roles assigned to black women in the North and just becomes an ugly, submissive domestic help in a house owned by a white family. Pauline becomes a rootless individual who fails to pass on Afro-American traditional knowledge to her daughter. Pauline Breedlove is presented as a creative artist who cannot find a way to express herself fully in a racist society. In the novel, she is compared to a creative artist, who seems to be “enchanted by numbers and depressed by words-- she missed without knowing what she missed ... paints and crayons”,³³ but she is also the kind of artist whose desire to create an art out of it remains unfulfilled. The exploration of the idea of an unfulfilled artist has always been an important theme in black feminists’ writings. Alice Walker also in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* draws the reader’s attention to the same phenomenon, how a black woman artist always fails to find a suitable place in a white racist society, and the how artist inside them always fails to find the needed colour and crayon. By making the white family’s Kitchen a canvas, Pauline decides to waste all of her artistic talents.

In the absence of any creative outlet, for Pauline, “The Fisher’s kitchen becomes the place of Pauline’s art”, the only place where she can get “beauty, order, cleanliness and praise”.³⁴ Therefore, she never allows her daughter to dirty the kitchen in any possible way. Walker draws our attention to the same concept in *My Mother’s Garden* by quoting Virginia Woolf’s idea that every gifted woman is mocked over the centuries, an artistic woman “would have certainly gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village”.³⁵ The same can be said in the case of Pauline, when she comes to the North, what she misses most is the rainbow that symbolizes different aspects of her personality. Denise Heinze in ‘The dilemma of double consciousness in Toni Morrison’ points out that all beautiful colours within Pauline have “bleached white”.³⁶ All the above-mentioned factors play a very important role in making Pauline a dysfunctional mother. Her incapability to fight back also stems from her disconnection from her mother’s line. In absence of roots, she fails to adopt a significant identity.

³³ Ibid, 89.

³⁴ O’Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering*, 51.

³⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 235.

³⁶ Denise Heinze, *Dilemma of Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 73.

Even her husband Cholly also fails to support her, as both husband and wife conform to the social norms that destroy them. They have internalized self-hatred from the racist society they are living in. Karen Cameron points out the way Pauline confuses “self” with the “role” that fully denies her “a possibility of growth”.³⁷

In the North, Pauline becomes, as O'Reilly rightly points out, the woman who is “disinherited from the ancient properties of traditional black womanhood” and consequentially “motherhood emerged as a site of disempowerment” for her.³⁸ O'Reilly argues that dysfunctional mothers are also victims of self-hatred, as she further stresses “the need for the parents to love themselves if they are to love their children”.³⁹ Pauline internalizes the worst kind of white oppression, particularly when she begins to endorse the prevailing concept of white beauty. By idealizing white skin and blue eyes, the ultimate symbol of beauty in a white society, Pauline soon develops a kind of detestation for her complexion, and she transfers the same self-hatred to her daughter. Being herself a victim of racist ideology, Pauline could not raise her daughter on a strong footing. Her daughter Pecola also becomes a helpless target of the white hegemonic perception of the model family and the idea of white female beauty. Her daughter begins to dislike her black skin and aspires to blue eyes because she accepts the notion that blue eyes will always make her more acceptable in the eyes of others. Similarly, the mother sees her daughter, as an extension of her ugliness and finds herself incapable of loving her. The moment she sees her, she begins to detest her black skin and declares to herself, “But I knew she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly”.⁴⁰ Pauline Breedlove becomes incapable of loving her daughter and sees her simply as an ugly extension of her wounded self.

In most of her novels, Morrison highlights the condition of those daughters who are not in touch with their mother line. Some of Morrison's women do not know how to connect with their mother line while some deliberately reject this connection. Morrison's female characters like Sula (*Sula*), Pauline (*The Bluest Eye*) and Jadine (*Tar Baby*) refuse to connect themselves with

³⁷ Karen Cameron, *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction* (New York: Whitson, 1993), 18.

³⁸ Marco Portales, “Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye: Shirley Temple and Cholly,” in *Centennial Review*, No. 30 (1986): 496-506.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 126.

their mother line and prefer to be identified with normative gender ideologies.

The Bluest Eye deals with the negative consequence of over-dependence as Samuel & Hudson-Weems write that Cholly, Pecola, and Pauline Breedlove could not go beyond “the imposing definition of “the other’s look”.⁴¹ They have internalized the hostile gaze and are ashamed of their existence. Pauline Breedlove experiences the worst sort of oppression. She is the victim of the very idea and image of white beauty which is used to victimize a black woman who begins to believe that only a white woman stands for beauty and blackness symbolizes moral corruption and ugliness. It is only in the movie theatre that Pauline has been introduced to the most destructive idea of love and beauty. Her insecurities make her find an escape from these ideas. She blames her deformed foot for her ugliness and develops an intense hatred for her body. Then her hatred is also extended to her daughter.

Morrison depicts how Pauline Breedlove spends much of her time watching movies in cinemas, and her “mind’s eye view of the unborn child was formed in terms of white definitions of beauty and acceptability”.⁴² Thus, she wishes for a white daughter with blue eyes, someone she can show to others with a sense of pride. Pauline hates herself and it becomes extremely difficult for her to make her daughter love her black skin. Joyce Pettis points out how racism has played an important role “in the effacement and disparagement of herself as black women”, and as a result, she fails to nourish her daughter in a positive way.⁴³ Thus, Mother’s self-hatred and guilt are often handed over to the daughters, particularly if the mother’s issues regarding her self-esteem remain unresolved. In Pauline’s case, both her detachment from her past and her sense of alienation prove hurdles in the better development of her only child. In contrast to Pecola, her friend Claudia is being nurtured by a strong mother, Mac Teer, who teaches her the art of self-love. Thus, Claudia refuses to be impressed by Shirley Temple, a white girl with blue eyes, who is considered a symbol of white beauty and often adored by other black girls. Claudia remains unimpressed by the standards of beauty promoted by white culture. She gets all the moral and emotional support

⁴¹ Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Toni Morrison*, 36.

⁴² Andrea O’Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, 146.

⁴³ Joyce Pettis, “Difficult Survival: Mothers and Daughters in *The Bluest Eye*,” *Atlanta Georgia*, No. 4 (Fall 1987): 27.

from her home that further teaches her to disapprove of the "allotted subservient last place in society's hierarchical relations".⁴⁴ She confesses in the novel that her mother's voice takes all the misery from her life and makes the pain of racism endurable for her. Through the very act of storytelling, her mother eliminates her emotional pain. Thus, storytelling is depicted as one of the finest survival strategies in Morrison's novel that teaches black girls to combat the evil forces of racist hatred. Her mother's cultural wisdom and knowledge help Claudia to destroy all the layers of oppression through the very act of self-love. William concludes that Claudia's "positive- self-definition is nurtured by her continuing relation to a maternal oral tradition".⁴⁵ Unlike Pecola, she learns to appreciate the wisdom of black culture and appreciates "the beauty of Afro-American folk tradition of storytelling".⁴⁶

The mother-daughter relationship is considered one of the most significant themes of Afro-American Literature. Although Morrison's novels challenge the stereotypical concept of a self-sacrificing black mother, she considers it as one of the most manipulating linguistic tools that are often used to control black women. These controlling images are often used to sabotage the positive identity of black mothers and also narrow down their domestic and social spheres. In the case of black women, these stereotypes are promoted by the dominant culture that is both racist and patriarchal in nature. Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, defines this kind of mothering as a powerless responsibility that does not seem to empower mothers. Under the control of patriarchal norms, mothers "relinquish authority to others, and lose confidence in their values"⁴⁷ and Ruddick also defines it as an "abdication of maternal authority" and a type of "inauthentic mothering".⁴⁸

This kind of motherhood increases the mother's suffering and often results in violence, such as oppressing mothers either committing suicide or killing their offspring. Emily Jeremiah elaborates on this concept in 'Troublesome

⁴⁴ Lisa Williams, *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2010), 62.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 111.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Practices: Mothering Literature and Ethics’ writing that the victimized mothers not only suffer themselves but also end up killing their offspring.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In black feminist writings, the positive concept of mothering is promoted, which allows mothers to not only claim personal space for themselves but also empowers them in all possible ways. This kind of mothering is also helpful in teaching black children various survival strategies that are further useful in combating different types of racism. From this angle, mothering emerges as more of a politics of the heart or a political act that teaches a black child the art of loving oneself. The art of self-love teaches black children not to internalize white racism and to unlearn the racist way of thinking.

Morrison’s novels seem to endorse the idea that every black mother has to preserve both the vulnerable and valuable traits of her children. Thus, strong mothers can raise strong offspring. Dysfunctional mothers often lack a positive sense of self and bring up their children to be “broken in half.... to loathe themselves”.⁵⁰

Morrison’s novels explore the idea of cultural bearing and define it as a task assigned to every Afro-American woman. African-American mothers must pass on to the next generation the knowledge about African-American cultural heritage. After knowing the custom and traditions of the African-American community, black children will learn to take pride in their ancestral inheritance. This is one of the reasons that ancestral figures have given great importance in her novels, and they are considered a symbol of wisdom and ancient knowledge.

Drawing on Dubois’s concept of double consciousness and the black folk sensibilities inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, Morrison tries to create new alternative narratives of black maternal identity that problematize white patriarchal European discourses on motherhood. From this angle, her theory of mothering provides an informative overview of the historical, literary and intellectual context of early twentieth-century European literature. Toni Morrison’s strong black mothers like Mrs. Mac Teer

⁴⁹ Emily Jeremiah, “Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature and Ethics,” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, No. 4 (2003): 7-16.

⁵⁰ Andrea O’Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering*, 33.

(Claudia's mother), Eva and Hannah destroy the stereotypical representation of black mothers. By sabotaging the conventional images associated with black mothers, Morrison gives a new and more liberating definition of black motherhood. According to it, black mothers are not others, but strong and independent individuals who skillfully teach their children the art of living.

Black mothers are labelled as dysfunctional mothers, mammies and matriarchs, and throughout their lives, they fight against these prevalent stereotypes. Toni Morrison explores the experience of motherhood from a new perspective. These black females are not just stereotypical selfless mothers but strong individuals who take on an important part in their children's mental and emotional development and refuse to nourish their children at the expense of their individuality.