

**TRACING THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER  
RELATIONSHIP IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*,  
ALICE WALKER'S *TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR* AND  
DOROTHY WEST'S *THE WEDDING***

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**I**

**Objective of the paper:**

This paper tries to document the importance of the African-American mothers as guardians of the African-American's heritage and traditions. In respect to the women who helped to nurture their community, and in protest against racism and sexism that have threatened to destroy them, a variety of mother characters have emerged in the writing of contemporary African-American women like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Dorothy West.

Mothers used to teach their daughters the aspects needed to understand the realities of life as an African-American woman. Daughters respected and valued their mothers' attempts to prepare them for life in a racist world. African-American girls are socialized early into their roles as mothers, recognizing that they have a responsibility for the survival of the African-American community.

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Girls are still “taught to hold the Black community together” (Joseph 106), and to survive whatever intensity they may face. Stanlie M. James suggests that “the young African-American women are socialized “to accept responsibility for the uplift of the race” (49), and recognize that they need to support each other. Furthermore, the qualities that are emphasized by mothers to their daughters are the same qualities that the daughters admit to admiring in their mothers. These include “courage, strength, concern, care, mothering perseverance and sacrifice” (Joseph 106). The recognition of these qualities has helped to create a positive image of mothering within the African-American community, and has given African-American women a legacy of strength to draw on when life becomes difficult.

Drawing on the Womanist movement, the study attempts to understand and explore the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship in contemporary women's fiction. African-American women are looking for concepts and frameworks that would differentiate their writings from those of the white feminists. Although they do not want to throw out the advantages feminism has given them, they do not want at the same time to take on the narrowness of the feminist viewpoint. They have tried to form a new vision. Some African- American women choose “black feminism” as a label to differentiate their ideology from white feminists. Still the “black feminist” label does satisfy not the whole group of African- American women . Some of them, even totally reject it. Hence we have the term “Womanism” which was first coined by Alice Walker

in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), and has been frequently adopted by African- American women writers to express their perspectives on the collective experience and struggles of their fellow African- American women.

### **Fighting the Stereotypes**

The mother-daughter relationship is a focal point in womanism. African-American mothers have to rely on their strength through a variety of struggles. Facing the dual limitations of sexism and racism, African-American mothers were confronted with cultural myths and stereotypes that have invalidated both their femininity and their abilities as mothers. African-American women also recognized that the traditional patterns of motherhood have not been adequate to explain their experiences and struggles which they have faced as mothers.

The passing down of traditions in African cultures is traditionally considered an integral part of the process of mothering. From this background, one begins to glimpse the historical importance of the mother's role to African-American culture. Stereotypes and images of the mother that emerged both from slavery and from immigration to urban centers have had an impact on how mothers and motherhood in African-American culture are viewed. These stereotypes, and the effect they have had on African-American mothers' lives in America, are being critiqued through the creation of new mother figures in contemporary fiction by African-American women writers. Like all women, African-American women have struggled against the expectations placed on women, which often include

the biological and social assumption of the role of mother. However, African-American women have been faced with the additional struggle of being labeled, as Alice Walker notes, the “mule of the world” :

Because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else ... refused to carry; the weight of motherhood is compounded even further by the restrictions that the socio-economic burdens of a racist society have placed on African-American women (“Gardens” 237).

Challenging these controlling stereotypes has long been a core theme in womanist writings. To many womanists, these controlling stereotypes associated with African-American women are so negative that they almost necessitate resistance, if African-American women are to have any positive self-images. As Collins puts it, “for Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to reject controlling images and integrate knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival”( Black Feminist Thought 100).

Recognizing the danger of these controlling stereotypes on African-American women, womanists call for African-American female writers to challenge and fight these stereotypes, as a way to achieve positive self- definition and independence. As Ogunyemi puts it:

The black women writer in Africa and in the United States has finally emerged as a spoke women for black women and the black race by moving away from black male chauvinism and the iconoclastic tendencies of feminism to embrace the relative conservatism of womanism .( 34)

Writing their own experiences of motherhood, African-American women created a number of new images that reinforced positive perceptions of African-American mothers both in and out of their culture and community, and have taught their daughters how to survive.

The African-American mother needs an awareness and understanding, by all other members of her society, of the depth of oppression she has faced. To gain this understanding, African-American mothers must address three elements: their acknowledgement as a human beings, their recognition as women, and an understanding of their special position as African-American women as it diverges from that of white women.

Like many African-American women Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Dorothy west found that the feminist movement inadequate to deal with the problems of the majority of African-American women. For them, the experience of African-American women is entirely different from that of Whites. They argue that “African-American women’s experience outside the house as a result of the poor economic

situations of their life has not pushed them to declare their enmity of African-American men but to form instead a gender alliance to fight the racism they are encountering in their society”( Deyab 32).

Womanists explore past and present connections between black America and Africa. Their novels are full of characters who are proud of being African-American and from Africa. Throughout their writings, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Dorothy west are interested in presenting and introducing their ancestors. They struggle to empower African-American women who have historically suffered oppression because of both race and gender. Their concern with these issues stems from their desire to correct the wrongs which have been historically directed against African-American women. They adopt the term “Womanism” to express the richness, complexity and the struggle of African-American women in a society that is undermining both Blackness and womanhood. In their writings, their womanist ideas have moved from individual bases to collective ones. They examine the history of African-American women from slavery to present and its impact on the whole African-American race in America. In this, they fulfill one of the womanist ideas their care “the wholeness of the Black community” (“Gardens” xi) male and female alike.

## II

### Coming to Terms with Maternal History

Traditionally, motherhood was one of the main means which asserted the female identity. In *Beloved*, Morrison allows us to hear the mother's story, the mother's language, and to know the mother's history of maternal love. She explores motherhood and the distortion of maternal love caused by slavery through the mother-daughter relationship.

Building upon African American women's experiences of and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of African American motherhood that is completely different from the motherhood practiced in the dominant culture. In her novels, “she creates mothers and daughters who search for stories that will help them reclaim their whole selves” (Brewer 3).

Morrison adopts the term “womanist” to express the complexity and the struggle of African American women in a society that is undermining both Blackness and Womanhood. “She writes to make African American women visible, their voices heard and their identities acknowledged” (Deyab 2). She wants to create characters that can challenge and fight the white American stereotypes of African-American women, as a way to achieve positive self- definition and dependence.

Morrison argues that “the gap between Africa and Afro-America, and the gap between the living and the dead, and the gap between the past and the present does not exist” (Darling 247). These gaps can be bridged by assuming historical

responsibility through remembering those who died in the Middle Passage as well as during slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the ghost as a narrative device and “the purpose of making her real is to make history possible and making memory real” (Darling 249).

Drawing on the Womanist movement, she attempts to explore the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship in the system of slavery. Morrison as a womanist believes that the distant past history of African-Americans under slavery has haunted the whole race and become a burden. Hence, she looks for ways to heal the wounds of that history so that African-Americans can cope with their present as well as their future. In order to accomplish a sense of collective healing, Morrison believes that “a keen sense of history is crucial for her characters and for her readers, not to be burdened by the past, but to tell a story of the past that can revitalize the present” (Peterson 51). In doing so, Morrison satisfies Ogunyemi's definition of the womanist as the one who “incorporates racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations into her philosophy” (21)

“By her insistence on the importance of collectivism, which is the only way by which African people could protest and achieve their survival, Morrison tried to awaken her race and direct them towards the way of salvation through her narrative” (Owais 157). Her desire to go back to the past and reconstruct slavery in the novel corresponds to a slave mother's yearning to recover and recreate the maternal relation between herself and her daughter that has been violently severed by the

inhumane system of slavery. In *Beloved*, she explores the complexity of maternal emotions by introducing the system of slavery in which the slave holders cruelly severed the most primal of human relations; the maternal love was deformed, distorted and violated.

Morrison examines the complexity of maternal experiences, and shows that mothers are those who also need to be understood. Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* that

The struggle for Morrison's mothers is not how to balance work and family but rather how to fulfill the important tasks of motherwork in the face of racism and poverty. In Morrison's fiction, black mothers... must mother their children in a world hostile to them and must battle to provide the preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing necessary for the empowerment of their children. (42)

In Morrison's novels, mother-daughter relationships symbolize the alienation, separateness, and disconnectedness. Mothers and daughters are alienated within society and from society; they are true aliens coming from a past of lost history and lost rights. They must search for new stories, myths, and meanings out of a broken culture. Morrison believes that only in connection to the past is there hope for the future.

The mother and the daughter are part of the same story and they are dependent on one another to pass on their heritage, the two voices become one. In *Beloved*, Sethe is both daughter and mother. Daughterhood is Morrison's link between past and future, for these are the women who must pass on the story, but they must first learn the story from their mothers, these daughters learn how to succeed in the world with the knowledge of the past. However, in some cases, as O'Reilly analyzes in her article "Across The Divine" that:

The daughter feels rage towards her mother, she is expected to identify with her because the daughter is also a woman who... will some day become a mother/wife as her mother did. The daughter resists this identification because she does not want a life like her mother's (74).

Morrison elaborates the mother-daughter relationship in *Beloved* from the perspective of the mother. The mother's killing of her baby girl to protect her from experiencing a life of enslavement initiates a relationship that is distorted by the mother's misunderstood concept of motherhood, which has turned an intimate relationship into a destructive and dangerous connection.

### **III**

At the same time, Alice Walker's exploration of the image of mother in the context of history, the community, and the interpersonal relationships within and without the family

opens a new dimension to the tradition of black women writing. While depicting black women's experiences as mothers and as daughters in their own light, "Walker has examined the mother-daughter relationship which has a strong hold on mothers' and daughters' consciousness and affects their relationship with others through their lives"(Kim 15). The maternal image allows the daughters to convert their desire for mother love into an effort for connection with their own mothers and with others. Such efforts in Walker's works become a way for reconstructing the characters' familial or communal history, forming a community, and placing the characters as part of the history and the community.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker embraces a common womanist characteristic; the necessity to heal the psychological wounds influenced African Americans as a way to live their present , and look forward to a better future. She wants to reconstruct and reclaim the past, the self and the community of African American women and to expand the work of her foremothers, particularly that of Zora Neale Hurston.

Throughout her work, Walker celebrates links between her and those who have gone before. Her motive is to reconnect past to present in order to renew the ancestor's values; as she says "if we kill off the sound of our ancestors, the major portion of us, all that is past, that is history, that is human being is lost, and we become historically thin, a mere shadow of who we were on the earth" (Living By The Word 62). She stresses the importance of learning about oneself from

one's ancestors for "we are who we are largely because of who we have been" (Living By The Word 63). Part of Walker's understanding of herself ,both as a woman and as an artist, comes from her awareness that she is linked across the continent and through generations "with women who have exercised their creativity despite racism and sexism that would deny its expression" (Winchell, 2).

Walker adopts the term womanism to enhance African American women's struggle towards empowerment, she wants to create a positive self-definition for the African American women. Throughout her writing, her motivation for writing is to allow African American women to gain a social and a psychological position in a racist society. As a womanist, Walker attempts to empower her female counterparts who have historically suffered oppression because of race. Her self-conscious concern with these issues stems from her desire to correct the wrongs which have been historically directed against African American women.

Womanists look for ways to heal the wounds of that history so that African-American women can cope with their present as well as their future. They believe that "a keen sense of history is crucial for their characters and for their readers, not to be burdened by the past, but to tell a story of the past that can revitalize the present moment" (Peterson 51). According to Gloria Steinem and Diana L. Hayes, "womanism reflects a link with a history that includes African cultural heritage and enslavement in the United States. " (640)

“Walker uses in this novel the genre of fiction to offer an idealized account of her womanist vision of an alternative world in which the past influences the present. However, she situates the past in the present with the use of reincarnation” (Thomas 140). She creates a literary expression of womanism by employing the power of speech in the novel. When “asked where she is in Temple, she said ‘I am everywhere and I am everybody” (Jaynes 64). We have seen that Walker allows women to gain control of their narratives in the novel. Mothers are given voice and allowed to speak the discourses that have been suppressed through male –authored history.

In *The Temple of My Familiar*; Alice Walker describes the journey of the mother and her daughter through an “emotional relationship of conflict, confusion, and misunderstanding. Through personal struggles, the daughter finally discovers their own worth and self-identity, allowing for a better understanding of her mother and her sacrifices”(Anderson 7). Walker is concerned with the inadequacy of the emotional and physical roles prescribed for women by society; she moves her discussion from the social journey to the psychological one. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, she continues to alter the traditional definition of what it means to be female. In fact George Stade states that “the novel embodies Walker’s womanist vision” (264).

The loss of familial and communal values is depicted in *The Temple of My Familiar* as affected... the plight of contemporary sons and daughters

whose maturation processes have been crippled by their relationships with parents especially by a mother's rejection.... Exoneration of the mother, frequently blamed by adult children for their faults and failures, becomes a key to self knowledge and cultural awareness in Temple, as Walker's characters, guided by matriarchal wisdom, exorcise their personal anger through painful reassessments of their relationships with their mothers and grandmothers.(Braendlin 55-6).

#### **IV**

In *The Wedding*, Dorothy West presents African American women's reactions to these images by resisting these controlling images and thus claiming a sense of self definition in one's society as we have seen in Shelby's example and her family. As a womanist, West writes differently not only from her white counterparts but also from her African American male writers. Unlike the writings of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, West deals with the African American experience not only from a gender perspective, but also from a comprehensive point of view: racial, political and economic ones.

West aims to teach African American women how to achieve a fully self- realized womanhood where they can hold a world view that would enable them to see themselves not

through the lens of racist stereotypes, but to look at the world around them and to see themselves as struggling for wholeness for unity of heart, mind , body and spirit.

The major characteristic of womanist fiction is its women-centeredness where it investigates issues related to African American women. Among these issues is African American women's relationship with each other and with their men in a society that is doing everything to oppress both of them. As a way to counteract this oppression, womanists do their best to form a gender relationship that includes among its bases a clear awareness that all African American women and men share a common problem; subjugation in a society that is both racist and sexist. (Deyab 83).

West's exploration of intra-female relationships is “part of a womanist strategy to challenge both traditional and nontraditional power structures that block human liberation”(Allen 98). Although the issue of racism is not the focus of *The Wedding* , West refers indirectly to the relationship between African American and white people and the influence of such relationship on the African American community.

The Wedding is concerned primarily with the struggles of an African American middle-class family who could achieve financial and social status on par with their white counterparts. In this novel, West uses the trope of marriage and coupling as a medium for questioning the uplift model that places social and financial aspirations above racial and communal unity and personal happiness. “West illustrates how issues of race, class, sex, and color continue to inform the lives of generations of African Americans across time and space”(Mainor 321).

The loss of familial and communal values is depicted in The Wedding to affect the situation of contemporary daughters whose maturation processes have been crippled by their relationships with parents especially by a mother’s rejection. “A daughter’s own dreams and goals are in jeopardy because they might conflict with her mother’s hopes and desires for her” (Andreson 12). The mother and her daughter do not respect each other’s choices and philosophical beliefs, but “they do preserve the mother-daughter relationships and remain connected physically and emotionally” (McDaniel 84).

West uses the frame story of a daughter’s wedding to delve into her ancestors’ history in order to “appraise the ways in which desire for racial advancement has affected personal decisions across generations”( Mainor 321). By contrasting the events of the past on this present generation, West illustrates how issues of race, class, sex, and color continue to inform the lives of generations of African Americans across time and space. “Although West critiques the African American middle class, she locates the catalyst for their negative behaviors in the

failure of racial uplift ideology, rather than categorize an entire class of people in terms of victimization”(Mainor 291). She demonstrates how accepting and understanding one's history is essential for the foundation of racial progress.

### CONCLUSION

the African-American mother – daughter relationship which becomes the lens through which the racial histories of African Americans are revised, it was worthy to study three of the most gifted contemporary African -American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Dorothy West. The present paper has explored the theme of the image of African American motherhood and the mother-daughter relation through three novels: *Beloved* (1987), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *The Wedding* (1995).

One can conclude that Morrison's *Beloved* portrays the violated maternal love under slavery, racism and poverty. The act of infanticide which forms the matrix of the novel provides an opportunity to question the ideology underlying the system of slavery in American history, a system which could drive a slave mother to kill her daughter in the act of love.

Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, on the other hand, describes the journey of the mother and her daughter through an emotional relationship of conflict, confusion, and misunderstanding. Zedé and her daughter Carlotta are continually engaged in an exchange of ideas throughout their lives, each struggling for control of their own identity.

West's *The Wedding* examines the relation between a mother and her daughter and how the mother rejects her daughter's choice of her groom because he is not from their own social class and their race.

All of the three novels deal with the relationships between mothers and daughters: Morrison, Walker and West explore motherhood and the moral dilemma that it poses in the lives of African American women through the mother-daughter relationship. These three women writers present the emotional complexity of ethnic women as mothers and daughters in the specific social and historical contexts. Moreover, the novels explore various historical periods and encompass diverse cultural experiences. These stories also depict women locked between two points: her daughter, who is her future, and her mother, who is her past. For both mother and daughter, they trace the development of the self and identity.

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