



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In most societies, mothers play a more important role in their children's lives than fathers do. They give birth to their children, take responsibility for childcare, spend more time with their children than men do and sustain emotional ties with their children. Many theorists agree that the maternal bond is the foremost and most essential relationship in everyone's life. Many theories about the bond between mothers and their children have been developed and conceptualized using a psychoanalytical approach.

Ruth Perry, in *Mothering the Mind*, offers the psychoanalytical explanation of mothering infants and children when she discusses the writers' process of "mothering the mind," a process where writers depend upon particular other people—their lovers, sisters, patrons, mothers, aunts, friends or husbands—to help them create the conditions, the inspiration and the atmosphere for their work (5). In developing her argument about the significance of those nurturing others on writers' ability to create their writings, Perry re-examines the early stage of childhood when play is of the utmost importance to an individual's self formation. During play, mothers should fulfill their duty in "intercept(ing) the world, confer(ring) unconditional approval, regulate(ing) the environment, supply(ing) missing psychic elements and mirror(ing) certain aspects of self"(4-5). Perry illustrates that mothers can perform the first three duties by protecting their children from experiences that can harm them and providing environments that "foster(s) being, comfort, and health—a world in which it is safe to have any thought or feeling" (6). Having this sheltered space, the children can safely play, experiment and negotiate between inner and outer reality. Moreover, when

children suffer from the loss of their fathers or feel estranged from friends or society, mothers should “supply the children’s missing psychic elements” by restoring their losses and creating what the children have never had and have always longed for. Mothers should also serve as a mirror helping to verify infants’ behavior and feelings by reflecting back to them their own behaviors and sensations. “When a baby cries, its mother often shows concern; when a baby coos and gurgles, its mother smiles and talks to it” (6-7). These mirroring responses provide the infants their first objective access to their inner world, help them to explore that new terrain, as it were. The mothers’ faces are the first way the infants see themselves.

The importance of mothers increases especially in the relationship with their daughters. Nancy Chodorow, the feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst indicates in *Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* that mothers play a significant role in helping daughters develop their feminine sense of self (138). This indication is supported by Lampl-de Groot’s theory of heterosexual orientation that “[The] attainment of heterosexual orientation [...] involves an identification on the part of children with parents of their own gender. [...] A boy gives up his mother in order to avoid punishment, but identifies with his father because he can then gain the benefits of being the one who gives punishment, of being masculine and superior” and “a girl identifies with her mother in their common inferiority and in her heterosexual stance” (qtd. in Chodorow 113). The process of identifying feminine inferiority is very important especially for black daughters because it helps black daughters to prepare themselves for vulnerability to physical, sexual and psychological abuse under slavery.

Unfortunately, black mothers having to work both in the field and in the white men’s house under slavery seldom had the opportunity to develop their relationship

with their daughters. With these limitations to be with their children and to provide them the nurturing relationship, the black mothers needed help with childcare from surrogate mothers to ensure the children's physical and psychological well-being. The surrogate mothers could be sisters, grandmothers, relatives, friends or anyone who possess, according to Perry, the nurturing qualities without regard to sex or nature of relationship(7).

Perry's theory provides a psychoanalytical explanation to the importance of the relationship between mothers and their children. Her theory also includes the maternal role in fostering the children's creativity and expands the term "mother" to include everyone with nurturing qualities. As a result, the concept of "mothering the mind" will be used as a theoretical base concept to examine familial female relationships, maternal figures and their legacy in three African American novels: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988).

The decision to study the works of these three well-known African American writers is based on the fact that these three novels—*The Color Purple*, *Corregidora* and *Beloved*—present the recurring theme of the mother-daughter bond. The daughters presented in these novels do not have the chance to experience maternal nurturance, therefore, when they undergo terrible experiences caused by racism and/or sexism, they suffer greatly from their trauma. The thesis is divided into three main sections that closely examine each of the selected novels. Each section includes an analysis of the female protagonists' painful experiences caused by slavery and/or patriarchy, their relationship with their maternal ancestors and their maternal figures and how these people and their legacy help the female protagonists to endure and eventually overcome their pain.

The section on *The Color Purple* examines how Celie, a young black woman who does not have the chance to develop a close relationship with her mother and who has to fight her way through the experiences of abuse caused by the black men in her life in particular, can redefine her concept of self in terms of psychological condition and body, creativity and self-dependence with the help of her surrogate mother, Shug Avery. Shug's ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for Celie to develop the sense of self will be analyzed through the use of Perry's theory of maternal duties to show Shug's ability to foster Celie's creativity which contributes to Celie's new perspective on life. Celie is no longer a passive woman who is abused by her husband and seeks refuge from Christianity but she has emerged as a self-dependent woman who feels satisfied with her life.

The section on *Corregidora* may lead to a better understanding of familial female relationship because it is a story about four generations of Corregidora women living in a house that excludes any male members. The mother-daughter relationship in this novel is different from Celie's relationship with her mother in *The Color Purple* because it brings about both traumas and healing. In order to fight or rebel against racism and sexism of Brazilian slavery, Ursa's maternal ancestors pass on the family history to the next generation through their narratives. Ironically, the family history that should be used to "supply(ing) missing psychic elements" (Perry 5) becomes a mechanism to hurt their own descendants. Ursa cannot solve her problems. She suffers from her fragile psychological condition, her deadened sexual feelings and her difficulties in developing relationships with others and cannot develop her sense of self. However, Ursa cannot develop her sense of self without her maternal ancestors' life stories. I also discuss how the personal stories of Ursa's mother enable her to assess the painful past and how she learns to turn those narratives into a

mechanism for coping with pain and ultimately liberating herself. Because of the fact that Ursa's trauma is based on both her personal experiences and the maternal narratives passed down by her ancestors, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's idea of "intersubjective communion" and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory about danger of the incomplete history are used to illustrate the negatives effects of the maternal narratives on Ursa. Rushdy's idea of "intersubjective communion" is defined as "the creating of a sensibility that the hearer is an equal sharer in the story to the degree of being as involved in its events as the teller, of believing oneself to have lived out what another experiences" (273) and it is used to describe pain caused from the second hand experiences. Moreover, the danger of having an incomplete history is elaborated through Abraham and Torok's idea which suggests the hearer's ability to be traumatized by the gap of the incomplete history because there is "the unconscious suspicion that something had been left unsaid during the life of the deceased relatives in the family line" (qtd. in Rushdy, 279).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is selected as part of this study to illustrate the importance of maternal figures and their maternal duties under slavery because it depicts a black mother, Sethe, who kills her own daughter ironically because of her deepest love for her daughter. Her act of infanticide can be referred to as the ultimate gesture of a loving mother to protect her daughter from the inhumane treatment of slavery. The murderous of act of Sethe cannot be clearly explained by using Perry's idea which contributes to the relationship between white mother and their daughter. Therefore, Andrea O'Reilly's theory which explains the condition of black mothers being threatened with sexism and racism and highlights the maternal duty to preserve children's lives as a priority is used to enhance our understanding of the relationship between mothers and their children under conditions of enslavement.

O'Reilly's theory of motherwork defines four maternal tasks which are preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing and healing. The first three maternal tasks help to protect black children from racism and/or sexism. O'Reilly depicts these tasks as integral in enabling children to develop self-love and self-esteem. They will grow up with a feeling of being loved and a sense of belonging and self-worth. Children endowed with a strong black identity will be better prepared to face the experiences of discrimination on one's race and gender (38). On the other hand, those black who are deprived of preservation, nurturance and cultural bearing in their childhood are unable to avoid being the victims of racism and/or sexism.

In her enslaved and unempowered condition, Sethe is deprived of these maternal practices. Sethe has never been preserved or nurtured by her mother because her mother was mutilated and brutally killed since she was very young. Sethe also hardly has any experiences of cultural bearing from her mother. As a result she is ill-equipped in dealing with the harrowing situations in her life under slavery. She is haunted by her traumas of being dehumanized and abused by Schoolteacher and his men and her act of infanticide. In order to liberate Sethe from the suffering caused by the traumatic experiences under slavery, their maternal figures have to fulfill the nurturing duties that her biological mothers failed to do. This chapter also includes the importance of the surrogate mothers—Baby Suggs and Paul D—and the community of women in helping Sethe to set herself free from the painful past and memory.

This thesis should contribute to a better understanding of how women in three contemporary African-American novels experience pain from the past and in their present existence and how these women, through familial female relationships and maternal figures and their legacy, are able to endure and overcome their pain and find it possible to develop their sense of self. It hopes to draw the readers' attention to the

importance of familial female relationship and maternal figures and eventually their legacy on a child's sense of self.

