

Eva's Power: Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Sula

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ABSTRACT

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison discusses questions about the position of black women in the communities and reinterprets black motherhood, showing the importance of black motherhood for the existence and continuity of the black communities. It contributes to black survival and the transmission of black culture and the establishment of black identity. By analyzing Eva Peace in *Sula* and her conflicts with her and her offspring, this essay aims to explore Toni Morrison's re-writing and presentation of black motherhood under intersectionality in light of theories related to black motherhood.

Keywords: *Black motherhood, Intersectionality, Toni Morrison, Sula.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is a black American novelist whose works are addressing black women's position within society and the community. One of her works, *Sula*, is praised as an epic of black women in light of the depiction of powerful black women. Morrison depicts a town named Medallion where the black live together and creates a series of characters. The protagonist, Sula Peace, is being the focus both academically and socially regarding her resistance to sexism. Except for gender issues, Toni Morrison also rewrites the African motherhood tradition in her works, which is misunderstood and underestimated by the dominant white culture. Morrison creates all kinds of black mothers such as Pauline and Mrs. Macteer in *The Bluest Eyes*, Sethe in *Beloved*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, and Eva in *Sula*. Their power of motherhood and plight under racism are the main points for Morrison's writing. Through it, she reinterprets the traditional black motherhood and emphasizes its significance for continuing the black race.

While learning and analyzing Morrison's reinterpretation of black motherhood, the discussion about Eva is significant, within whom there is a strong power of motherhood. It contributes to Eva's sources of strength and independence, represents black women's courage and capability of resistance to sexism, explains Eva's complex attitude towards her offspring and shows a different form and view of motherhood. Thus, several

studies about Eva, most of which also consider her as a token of feminism due to her independence in the economy and the authority of her life and body.

In African tradition, motherhood is a very important factor of culture and is retained by enslaved Africans and even emphasized and elaborated because of their plight and vulnerability in society. Because of society's indifference to the black, the focus of black motherhood is protecting and empowering black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete [1]. Besides, under the racism, this kind of motherhood translates to 'other motherhood' and "community motherhood" [2], which means to bring up others' children. Moreover, to some extent, community mothering has a profoundly good influence on the establishment of organizations of black women in the afterward black women's movement.

Therefore, this essay will examine the conflicts between Eva and her offspring: her two birth children (Plum and Hannah) and her adopted children (the three Deweys) to examine how Toni Morrison presents the motherhood of Eva and its complexity in terms of the intersectionality. The first section will provide details about motherhood and black motherhood under the intersectionality. The second part will analyze Eva Peace's mothering nature regarding her relationship with her born children. The third section will examine Eva's other and community motherhood.

2. BLACK MOTHERHOOD UNDER INTERSECTIONALITY AND ITS COVERING FOR THE WHOLE BLACK COMMUNITIES

Motherhood is a significant African tradition and is retained by enslaved Africans and even emphasized and elaborated because of their plight and vulnerability in society. O'Reilly explains that mothering and mothers make the physical and psychological well-being and empower African-American culture [1]. Under the racism and society's indifference towards black groups, the prime objective of black motherhood is to protect and empower black children so that they may be powerful enough to prevent the harm of racism, resist racism practice, and successfully grow into adulthood. To achieve it, "mothers must hold power in African American culture, and mothering likewise must be valued and supported" [1]. Before Eva burns Plum, he sees and images "the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him" [3, 4]. He believes that it is baptism and everything is going to be all right [4]. His mother, Eva, embodies the powerful image of the ancient animal worship tradition to protect him from the harms of racism and society's ignorance and empower him. In a society where the black group and even the black culture and views are devalued, black women have to trace back their mothering tradition and require power from it. The empowerment is so significant that it is about the continuing of the black group under racism.

In general, mother work includes three major aspects, but black women hardly fulfill all of them due to racism. The first one is preservation, which means to keep their children safe and meet their basic living demands; following with it, the second demand is to nurture their emotional and intellectual growth; the final is to educate their children to be socially acceptable [3]. However, the most important thing for most black women, especially for the poor, is to ensure their children's living and the continuation of the black community. O'Reilly explains that "securing food and shelter, struggling to build and sustain safe neighborhoods, is what defines both the meaning and experience of black women's mother work and motherlove" [1]. When Boyboy abandons Eva and her children, the housework she could find will force her to leave her children for almost one day, while her children are too young to take care of themselves [4]. Eva struggles in meeting the fundamental demands of living. O'Reilly's opinion is proved by it and, meanwhile, provides a reasonable explanation of Eva Peace's actions in *Sula*, which will be detailedly analyzed in the following part. In terms of the low social status, heavy but low-salary works, and terrible living circumstances, it is hard for black women to fulfill the basic aspect, not to mention the other two.

Besides their children, black women also expand their mothering nature to shelter their men because of their disadvantaged situation. Black men hardly find decent jobs to make the living of their family and even themselves and endure the discrimination, which indicates a kind physical and psychological immaturity and vulnerability. In *Sula*, Eva's husband is a typical character reflecting these. He is not a reliable husband and father within his family: he is addicted to womanizing, drinking, and abusing. At work, he relies on his white master and has to go with him [4]. Besides, his name "Boyboy" also indicates his state of being a boy but not a man. Morrison suggests that "historically, black women have always sheltered their men because they were out there, and they were the ones that were most likely to be killed" [5]. The whole black group's immaturity in physic and mental force them to seek sheltering and protection from their mothering tradition. It provides evidence to analyze Eva's complex attitude towards men.

Eva's love for other men (except her husband) manifests the intersectional elements in black women's motherhood. Eva builds a house after her husband leaves home and welcomes all men in Medallion: "with the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men" [4]. It is puzzling for a woman abandoned by her husband to keep enthusiasm to other men. However, Eva's love for them is an expansion in motherhood because of racism. Black men's immaturity and vulnerability force them to find shelters, which happen to be what Eva provides: "knowing that even when she beat them, as she almost always did, somehow, in her presence, it was they who had won something" and "she argued with them with such an absence of bile, such a concentration of manlove" [4]. Eva's love for men reflects the tolerant nature within motherhood and provides those black men with the attention that they do not obtain from the white-dominant society.

However, Eva's complex attitude towards men is debatable. People may regard her prejudice towards men and hypercriticism towards other women as a sign of misogyny. It is natural to hold this opinion because, in *Sula*, Eva and other women display their hostility towards women who may have a sexual relationship with their husbands. However, Morrison may use *Sula* and Nel's words to express her view about it: "those women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs" [4]. The question, therefore, comes back to the demand of black men, and, except the sexual pleasure, the satisfaction and concentration they never gain from the white-dominant society are what Eva provides them because of the expansion of her mothering nature.

Black men do not hold the same patriarchal positions as white men, but it might be wrong to think of black

women's mothering tradition as matriarch. According to Hazel V. Carby, due to racism, many black men fail to find a decent job to support their families, and black women may be centres of households [6]. In *Sula*, the interesting point is that there are no men within the main four families. Sula talks to Nel that "Every man I ever knew left his children" [4]. The images of father and husband are, to some extent, missing so that the women naturally become the centre of their home. However, the dysfunctional patriarch does not mean matriarch. Matriarch means that a woman rules and dominates a family or a group [7]. But whether it is Helene or Eva, or later Nel and Sula, they all become the head of the family in the absence of a man. However, they focus either on raising their children or on pursuing their own pleasures, not in the least interested in ruling or controlling the lives of others [4]. It is clear to find out the differences between their actions and the controlling behaviour of matriarchs.

On the other hand, many black feminists regard matriarch as one stereotype of black women. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that the dominant slavery-era ideology fosters the creation of four controlling images of black women, aiming to maintain their subordination [8]. With the implication of uncivilization, the matriarch, as one of them, is a negative stereotypical image and functions as a source of oppression and degrading the black tradition and culture. Thus, due to the oppression from ideology and economy, black women try to develop a new consciousness of black motherhood and are empowered from it. Morrison rewrites black motherhood in *Sula* by creating all kinds of mothers and describing their challenges and plights.

Moreover, Eva's motherhood under the intersectionality is also reflected in the distribution of her house. Eva builds up a new house and leaves some room for other people [4]. In general, a house is a family's carrier and is a relatively closed and private concept. But Eva transforms it into an open and public room, which deconstructs the concept of a private family but establishes a small community. This behaviour is based on the African mothering tradition and slavery history. Collins argues that black women will take care of children whose parents do not live with them due to slavery, and childcare is a collective responsibility [8]. Thus, it is natural for black women to share house and family care responsibilities. Furthermore, this community-mothering-based tradition contributes to the establishment of the black groups and provides the black feminist movement and fights against discrimination with the fundamental organization. That is one of the reasons that black families and communities are the prime sources of resistance to racism.

3. REWRITING OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD: PRESERVATIVE MOTHERHOOD AS THE PRIME WAY TO KEEP BLACK CHILDREN ALIVE

Eva's motherhood is a kind of preservative motherhood. As has been discussed in the first part, Eva is in the same situation as most black women: struggling to ensure their children's living. When her husband leaves home, "...in November, Eva had \$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel" [4]. The disadvantaged economic situation forces Eva to ask other people for help. What is worse, her son Plum feels sick in December, and Eva spares no effort to save him [4]. But it is interesting, for there is no detailed description of how Eva teaches and educates her children in the novel: "Under Eva's distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncrasies, her own children, grew up stealthily" [4]. It implies Eva's ignorance of her children's education, and Eva explains to Hannah that she has no time to do so because she has to work and take care of three children. Like other black women, Eva can only keep their children alive because of their difficult situations.

However, Eva's preservative love also faces failure due to racism. Eva's son, Plum, returns from the war but has to return to his home because the government fails to keep its promises of homecomings. Like another black veteran in the town, Shadrack, they are ravaged and are abandoned by society. Eva finally kills him desperately because he is addicted to heroin and fails to be a well-being man. Eva comments that "he wanted to crawl back in my womb... And he was crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams...I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more" [4]. O'Reilly suggests that "mothering for black women...is about ensuring the physical survival of their children" [1] and provides reliable evidence towards Eva's horrifying action of killing her son. Due to racism and society's indifference to the black men, Plum fails to become a real man and even fails to keep his physical well-being, which symbolizes Eva's preservative motherhood's failure.

Moreover, Eva's preservative motherhood and mother love are so complex that many discussions around it. In *Sula*, there are two conversations in terms of mother love: one is a discussion that occurs to Hannah and other women, in which she believes that she loves her daughter but never likes her. After that, Hannah asks Eva whether she loves her children, and Eva says that she neither has time to think of the question nor to loves them. In Hannah's view, that love for children is spending time playing with them, which is also the common idea about good mothering. But O'Reilly argues that "normative discourses of good

mothering distance daughters from their mothers and the motherline” [1], for they result in children’s blame for their mothers’ “deficient mothering” and mothers’ inauthentic raising “in accordance with patriarchal discourse” [1]. O’Reilly’s view can explain Eva’s previous ignorance and actions to save her burning daughter in the following contents. It proves that Eva’s preservative motherhood is also a kind of good mothering.

However, Eva’s preservative mothering also has its disadvantages led by racial issues. Because of Eva’s concentration on her children and offspring, the lack of social acceptance (though it is not her fault entirely) also results in her children’s death. Plum dies of physical and psychological immaturity and social ostracism, and Hannah dies of psychological immaturity (relying on the sexual relationship with other men). In turn, her “idiosyncrasies” [4] cause her granddaughter’s hatred of her and sends her to the old people’s home [4]. The core issue for her children’s death is social acceptance, but behind it is racism. The black groups are ostracised by society so that they rarely achieve the last step of mother works: to educate their children to be socially acceptable. O’Reilly argues that Morrison equally concerns the psychological well-being of black Americans through the rewriting of black motherhood and the description of black mothers’ plight [1]. Eva Peace is a very important and typical character within them.

Morrison creates mothers like Eva to show her view of black motherhood and tries to change the negative stereotype of black motherhood as matriarch. Black feminists like Collins believe that matriarch is fundamental to oppression [8], leading to misunderstanding and misinterpreting of black culture and tradition of motherhood. Thus, what Morrison does is redefine black motherhood and make it the resource of black women. The absence of men in black families is a common phenomenon in *Sula* and leads women to become the centre of their house, and Eva is one of them. Although Eva looks like the head of her home, she never intervenes in other people’s life: “she let rooms to tenants who lived in her house with housekeeping privileges” [4]. It indicates that Eva is not the patriarchal head and even never wants to play this role. Morrison depicts Eva as a powerful mother who is struggling to make her children alive and as a charming and mysterious woman who dares to lose a leg to exchange money, whose courage comes from her motherlove for her children and the black community.

On the other hand, Eva’s motherhood is not based on the patriarchal ideology of motherhood. In the dominant culture, the mother is seen to be powerless and selfless, who can sacrifice herself for her children. That is the reason that motherhood is always regarded as the cause of women’s oppression [1]. Although Eva loses her leg

for money to support her family, she never sacrifices her sexual and emotional pleasure: “although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter” [4]. As the first section analyzes, Eva does so because of her expanded motherhood and her willingness. Nina Jenkins explains that black motherhood develops a belief in their empowerment and provides a base for self-actualization [9]. It provides an important view for the analysis of Eva and her black motherhood. For her, motherhood is the resource of her power, and, at the same time, it never hinders her from keeping herself pleased and accomplished. In general, Morrison depicts Eva as a strong and free mother and manifests the goodness of black motherhood.

There is a mother line within Eva, Hannah, and Sula, and it bears the culture and tradition. In African culture, women are the bearers and keepers of culture. Kalar Holloways suggests black women carry the voice and wit of mothers. They teach children to survive and remember [10]. Eva and Hannah’s failed marriage and love for (black) men influence Sula’s view about marriage and sexual relationships. Eva’s superficial indifference towards her children influences Hannah and enables her to distinguish the love from motherhood and the real affection for her children [4]. When Eva grows up, she will naturally choose the pantry where her mother has chosen to have sex with men [4]. O’Reilly explains that “motherline stories, made available to daughters through the female oral tradition, unite mothers and daughters and connect them to their motherline” [1]. Eva creates her story, and Hannah learns from it and creates hers; then Sula sees and learns their stories, she creates her story transmitting part of her ancestors’. This kind of culture and history preservation contributes to the survival of the black group’s culture and enhances the awareness of self-identity and racial identity.

4. THE OTHER MOTHERHOOD AND COMMUNITY MOTHERHOOD: THE INSURANCE OF BLACK COMMUNITIES’ EXISTENCE AND CONTINUATION

Under racism, the traditional black motherhood and mother works are translated to “other motherhood” and “community motherhood” to adapt to the living demand of the whole black community. Other motherhood means to take care of other people’s children; community motherhood enables a black community to look after children within it together. Bell hooks comments that “black women who had to leave the home and work... relied on people in their communities to help” [2]. Most of them cannot afford the fees of children’s daycare centres, and such centres may not exist because of racism and the ignorance of black

mothers and children. Therefore, the motherhood tradition and hope of continuing the black community naturally lead black women to take care of other's children and even the children within the community. It effectively symbolizes black women's resistance to racism, which Morrison values and depicts in *Sula*.

Eva's adoption manifests the other and community motherhood within her. In the house that she builds up by herself, she also takes in three boys as her adopted children [4]. It is intriguing for Eva to name all the three boys as "Dewey" and to believe that it is unnecessary to take them apart. But her actions could be seen as a consideration for the survival of black men. Under racism, it is difficult for a man to grow up to be an adult completely. Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell suggest that considering the vulnerability of black males in society and mothers' role as the primary nurturer, black mothers try to "help sons develop the character, personality and integrity a black man-child needs to transcend these forces" [11]. Their opinion provides a possible explanation for Eva's action: she is exploring how to ensure her children are alive. When it is difficult for a black child to be a man, letting three of them integrate and become one might be feasible to make them strong enough to confront racism and related issues.

Morrison depicts Eva as a powerful woman to show the power of black motherhood on the establishment of black racial identity. Eva's mothering strength also influences her adopted children, the three Deweys, and their change is the obvious evidence: "... each boy...accepted Eva's view, becoming ...in name a Dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name" [4]. Sharing the same name implies that they share the same identity as Dewey and black men. Collins suggests that black women's motherwork reflects the tensions trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of colour [8]. Black women have advantages in this task because of their other and community mothering. Their children grow up within a community to easily have a sense of belonging and consciousness of their identity as the black. Under Eva's fostering and education, Deweys recognize themselves as one. Morrison shows her readers the power of black motherhood and its significance for establishing black racial identity.

The power source of black mothers like Eva is the tradition that black women are the culture bearers and keepers. "In African American culture, women are the keepers of the tradition [and] the culture bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential the empowerment of black children and culture" [1]. Mothers like Eva carry the wisdom that they get from their ancestors and mothers so that they have the power to influence and to change their

children. Besides, the influence will not be limited to only one or two children because of the other and community mothering. In this process, they use their wisdom to ensure their children's living. Then their children will transmit their wisdom to the next generations, which ensures the continuation of black communities and protects and retains the tradition and culture in a society degrading their groups and culture.

In turn, Eva also benefits from the other and community motherhood. When her husband leaves home, she is in an economic plight and is helped by many other black families. They generously bring Eva "a warm bowl of peas and a plate of cold bread" and "a bucket of milk", and these things go on until November [4]. They embody the other mothering and community mothering. Collins argues that childcare is a collective responsibility in West African tradition and a situation fostering cooperative, age-stratified, woman-centred "mothering" networks [8]. People in *Sula* retain this community mothering tradition and help Eva bring up her three children. Besides, when Eva leaves to get money, "she left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day" [4], which also presents the other and community motherhood within black communities. Mothers like Eva, who have to leave home, benefit from the two kinds of motherhood, and, at the same time, the two motherhoods ensure the living of their children and the continuation of the whole black group.

5. CONCLUSION

Motherhood is a common theme in Toni Morrison's works, and she rewrites and redefines it. In the dominant culture, the black motherhood tradition is always regarded as the matriarch. Black mothers are always depicted as too powerless or too powerful, criticized by black feminists like Hazel and Patricia. They believe it is the stereotype and degrading of the African culture and will lead to culture loss and even racial identity loss. Morrison writes all kinds of black women and black mothers in her works, showing both their power and their disadvantaged situation. She presents how the traditional black motherhood is retained and translated in terms of intersectionality. From this standpoint, Morrison tells the story of black women and black mothers, enables their voices to be heard, and tries to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation from the public and dominant culture.

Eva Peace is one of those characters and is a well-portrayed one. Within her, it is clear to see her power as a mother and her efforts to keep her children living. However, her despair as a black mother under racism also shocks and confuses readers. But when applying the related theory of black motherhood's objectives, it is reasonable for her actions of killing her son. He fails to become an adult because of society's

indifference towards the black. When analyzing Eva, it seems she is like one of the dominant stereotypes of black mothers: matriarchal and tyrannic. But Morrison depicts her in detail and succeeds in changing this impression.

By depicting Eva, Morrison shows her readers the prime and essential objective of black motherhood: to ensure their children's living. The main cause of it is intersectionality, the mixture of racial issues and gender issues. Racism leads to a pervasive immaturity and vulnerability of black men, and black women as the traditional culture bearers have the tasks to ensure the continuation of their groups. Under racism, it is difficult for black women to fulfill all general mother works, and the living of their children, of children in their community, is the most urgent thing.

Sula addresses black women's position within communities, and Morrison integrates the African tradition of other mothering and community mothering in it. Eva benefits from them, and, in turn, she also contributes to them. Throughout her, Morrison displays the advantages of the other and community mothering and achieves her goal of rewriting and redefining black motherhood, which is seen as uncivilized and laggard. Rather than these, the other mothering and community mothering are well suitable for black groups to ensure their existence and continuation both in population and culture.

Toni Morrison succeeds in making the black women's voices be heard and manages to rewrite the tradition of black motherhood. She creates a powerful woman, Eva, to show readers the advantages of black motherhood and its progression and improvements under intersectionality and to work out the public misinterpretation. This essay tries to examine the significance of black motherhood as the fundamental insurance of the existence of black communities in terms of keeping the black alive, bearing culture, and enhancing race identity. But this essay only focuses on one character, Eva Peace, in one of Morrison's works, Sula. There still are many things and questions for further studies.

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