



Concept of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Jazz

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Abstract

Motherhood is an important concept in literature which has been variously depicted, discussed, interpreted and delineated by various authors across the ages. Toni Morrison too has dwelled upon this topic in her novel *Jazz* where she has tried to club the concept of motherhood with Mother Nature. Further, she has tried to depict how distorted childhood of orphaned children has huge psychological impact upon their future as well as their harmony with Mother Nature. The present paper thus endeavours to discuss the various shades and impact of motherhood as conceptualized by Toni Morrison in *Jazz*.

Key words: Morrison, Motherhood, Nature, Blacks, Slavery.

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Concept of Motherhood is a very important thread in the narrative framework of the novel *Jazz*. All the characters in the novel unravel the importance of maternal bonding and explicate the psychological effects and alienation which is faced by orphaned children. Joe's character is important as he is the common element of the love triangle which frames the story of the novel. Joe was an orphan child who had been deserted by her mother Wild who refused to take the responsibility of motherhood after Joe's birth. Wild had no ability to speak and she lived the life like an animal in the canefields. Joe was always obsessed with this idea and felt hurt because his mother never gave him the acknowledgement of being her son and he was also not in the capacity to take care of him. Joe had also attached the suffix 'Trace' with his name because he could not find any trace of his mother. The thing which troubled Joe the most in relation to his mother came along with him to the city as well. Joe wanted recognition from his mother so that he could establish his true identity. Joe's character here represents all the black characters that had come out of the

wilderness of the country side to the civilization of the city. Joe becomes representative of the blacks who jostled between the two mutually exclusive areas of nature and culture. For Joe, nature of Vesper country was his home. His roots were attached to that land of wilderness. His mother Wild gave him birth on that land. It was the land where he learnt the art of hunting and grew up to be a full- fledged man.

The character of Wild, i.e. Joe's mother, is here representative of Mother Nature to which blacks were deeply attached to. Thus, Joe is symbolic of black African spirit. Just as Joe was attracted towards her mother and longed for her love, in the same way blacks yearned for the love of wilderness which had become even more distorted and fragmented during the post- slavery period. Mother Nature had been exploited so much by the whites that her relationship with her children had become distorted. She was broken to such an extent that she had lost her feeling of motherhood. Mother Nature was so much affected and hurt by the horrors of white tortures that even though the bearing ability remained, the feeling



of love was completely lost in her. She didn't lay claim over her children as she found her completely incapable to flourish them. She had lost even her voice because of the innumerable tortures which had muted her to silence. Joe's mother, i.e. Wild too faced the same situation as Mother Nature. Blackshad been brutally exploited by whites both physically and mentally. The sexual invasion on her body led to the birth of a child but she was not ready to lay a claim on him.

Mother Nature, thus literally turned wild because of the condition she had been placed into. But, this behavior of Wild where she failed to recognize her own child created a loss of identity for Joe. He wanted to trace his roots. He wanted recognition from his mother. This left a huge void and sense of loneliness in the life of Joe even when he moved ahead in his life from countryside to the city. Though initially he was not completely sure that Wild was his mother, he felt a strange connection with her which provided a solace to his heart.

Hunters Hunter dropped many hints in front of Joe so that he could recognize his mother. While teaching him the principles of hunting, he told him never to hurt a female and should not consider Wild as his prey. Not only this, when he was telling Joe that crazy people had their own reason to do any task, he looked into the eyes of Joe and purposely told him that Wild is, "somebody's mother" (175). It was more or less clear from Hunters Hunter's face that this somebody was none other than Joe Trace. After this revelation of Hunters Hunter, Joe became obsessed with the idea of his mother. Joe and Victory saw her traces several times in the forest. But Joe knew that tree was not her favorite place. He heard her music across the river and tried to trace her down. The description of Joe's search of Wild across the river established the symbolic significance of Wild to the Mother Nature.

The second hunt for his mother came when he was ready to go to Palestine and there emerged a fire in the forest. Joe was very worried about his mother. So, he cancelled his journey and rushed back to Vienna in order to assure whether she was safe or not. But, he could not find any trace of his mother. He even wondered that she might not have escaped. At that very moment, four red wings emerged from a white-oak tree which was symbolic of her presence there. This really hurt Joe and he underwent an emotional breakdown and pleaded to his mother to come out and comfort her with her motherhood.

Here, Joe's dispossession by his mother is symbolic of all the blacks who were dispossessed of their Mother Nature's love due to the distortion in relations caused by the slavery. In his frustration, he aimed a shot at the white oak tree. Though the shot was harmful, it described the inner psychological upheavals which were occurring in Joe. He involved himself maniacally in several works on his journey to Palestine. People, however, considered this mania as a hunger for money, it was actually an inside hunger of love from his mother which he was diverting in other direction. The kinds of work he did during this time were actually related to nature which once against establishes the link between Joe's mother Wild and Mother Nature.

It was in this agony and desire for love that he met Violet Trace whom he later married. Violet was actually filler for the void which was created by Joe's mother Wild in him. Joe met Violet in Vesper country of Virginia where Violet Trace was resting under a walnut tree and Joe had hid himself at night in the same tree. But in the morning as he awoke, he fell into the lap of Violet and both got attracted towards each other. Violet for Joe was the invisible wild woman who would possess him and satiate his yearning for love. Wild got



replaced by young Violet. Infact, if one closely observes these lines, Joe's situation echoes the condition of all the blacks who when dispossessed of their love for wilderness adjusted themselves with milder view of nature which was signified by the pretty blooming flowers of Violet.

However, the character of Joe was not the only one which got affected by association to the city which in turn altered their notion of motherhood. Violet Trace's twenty years long stay in the city had a deepening impact on her mental framework. As the novel opens, we met a girl Violet living in the city who had assumed a double consciousness in her character. She was herself aware of that other Violet in her character and this double existence of Violet which the city gifted to her converted her from 'violet' to 'violent', as she was being named by people around her. Infact, the hard and monotonous life of city had turned violet into a tough, lonely and eccentric woman. Violet's childhood had played a pivotal role in this conversion. When Violet accompanied Joe towards the North, she initiated a new search for herself-identity. Her movement and migration from South to North played a key role in her evolution as the city life transformed her perceptions from rural background to urbanity. In the city, after some initial struggles, Violet was an independent and self sufficient lady.

Despite such a long stay, she could not adjust with the alien environment of the city. A black at heart who had the spirit of a countryside girl in her, she continuously juggled between her rural self who came to the fore in her personal musings and her urban self which was evident in front of public. Infact, through the character of Violet, Morrison wants to highlight how the Afro -American modernity which was hailed as the golden prospects of the dream world of a city proved to be cultural shock for a Violet. Her life might have been

moving in the modernity of the city life, she felt alienated with this cultural transition. The search for self identity also went haywire because for people like Violet, it was difficult to figure out the kind of identity they wished to possess.

Here too, the problem of nature versus culture where they are considered as mutually exclusive spaces gets surfaced which leads to the identity crisis in individuals. If both had maintained an overlapping position, the issues of alienation, adjustment and identity crisis would never ever have generated. In the city, Violet faced isolation and alienation. Her fragmented self echoed the disillusionment offered by the promised land of the city. Her fractured self was crystal clearly visible in two events. Once she without any reason sat down in middle of the street which expressed the frustration these streets of the city held for her. At another instance, she tried to steal a baby without any provocation. The stealing of baby was also seen by others as the desire for a baby which she hadn't possessed. Her sleeping with a baby doll also signaled this aspect. But, it was more an act of "Public Craziess" (22) than anything else. And this craziness was infused in her by the loneliness and monotonous life of the city. The South and its memories thus became antagonistic to the city life. If South was synonymous to wholeness, North became a place for isolation.

This craziness has its roots in many factors. After marriage with Joe, Violet somehow emerged victorious over her past which was haunted by the loss of her mother Rose Dear. Violet realized that the love she harbored for Joe instilled a feeling of wholeness in her. Joe thus completed her life which was earlier haunted by the loss of her mother who drowned herself in the well. But, the dazzle of the city snatched this wholeness away from her. Her fear of losing Joe as she had



lost her mother haunted her in the form of past memories. Violet mother Rose Dear had to bear the burden of raising five children all alone. Her husband didn't take care of the family. Further, she faced the humiliation of eviction. She ultimately resorted to suicide to put an end to all her sufferings.

Being a slave and woman, Rose Dear's life was a saga of sufferings haunted by economic despair and self defeat. During the time of slavery, her family was completely annihilated by the traumas and horrors of slavery. Even after the end of slavery, she had to face discrimination which oppressed her to a great extent. Even her husband was not with her when she was facing the cruel world along with her five little children. But for the sake of her children, she showed a lot of courage. Despite her efforts, she could not support her family economically. Survival became a serious issue because in order to feed her family, she was stripped of all her possessions. Rose Dear could not endure this dispossession and eviction. Hence, she called her mother True Belle.

True Belle somehow sorted their lives but four years after her arrival, Rose Dear committed suicide by jumping into a well. Throughout her life, Violet could not understand why her mother who was bold enough to face the sufferings and tortures of life decided to quit when everything was getting better in their lives. The question that – if Rose Dear decided to continue living even after the white men threw her out of the rocking chair, what was the force which prompted her to commit suicide when things were on the improvement side? Violet made some guesses that she might have committed suicide because she was aware that now her daughters were safe under the guardianship of True Belle.

But this image of well had a deep rooted impact on the psyche of Violet who

could never forget her mother Rose Dear. Truly, the well gave Rose Dear a relief from the hopelessness of life which she had felt in all those years of struggle. The suicide of Rose Dear, however, changed the peace of Violet's mind. The fear of losing and fear of not getting true love got seeped in the mind of Violet. After meeting with Joe, Violet hoped to overcome her haunting past, but the city life further pushed her into the well of loneliness. The strange streets of the city were full of strangers who re-instilled the feeling of loneliness and lack of love for her. And once again she went back to her past to seek relief in the lap of her dead mother.

The story of Violet becomes a story of refusal of motherly love. Violet was completely bereft of the love of her parents especially her mother, her family in Virginia and even the love of her own life. Another hunger of love propelled from her unfulfilled desire of being a mother. Initially, she was reluctant to have a baby. Later on she faced three miscarriages. All this increases a yearning for love in Violet which was clearly evident when she slept with a doll in her lap. All these hungers and hopelessness of the city life made her enter into the world of silence. She didn't feel the need to interact with others. She didn't even talk to Joe who initially brought happiness to her life. The narrator observed, "a poisoned silence" (5) moving around the whole house. She rather puts a lot of birds in a cage and spoke to them in order to find solace. For Joe, this silence of Violet was killing as he could not comprehend the reasons for this silence. He felt infuriated as well as perplexed at her behavior as his wife, "speaks mainly to her birds" (24). Violet and Joe thus drifted themselves apart in the loneliness of the city. In the busy life of the city where they had to just mind their own business amidst the alien strangers walking on the streets of the



city, they need to interact and share that loneliness to each other in order to be happy.

Haunted by their past, they failed to connect with each other. The lack of love they faced because of the absences of their respective mothers further created a gulf between the two. Joe got possessive for his mother Wild once again and started his hunt for the love of his mother which literally turned wild. And in his search for his mother Wild, he finally settled for Dorcas, an eighteen year old girl. Though certain critics felt that Violet was responsible for this downfall of relationship as it was she who chose to be silent with Joe. She stopped interacting with Joe and preferred birds to Joe. But as discussed earlier, her silences had deep roots which emerged out of the fear of losing loved ones.

Here, if one analyses the situation of Joe and Violet, it becomes clear that how the love for Mother Nature and their migration to the urban culture of the city put them in a situation of predicament which ultimately put to end to their happiness. Be it Joe's mother Wild or Violet's mother Rose Dear, each was the epitome of Mother Nature. Both the mothers who symbolized 'mother nature' got exploited by their white masters and had to kill themselves in one or the other way. But, this death of Mother Nature left a deep impact on the subsequent generations of blacks who carried in their blood and soul an inherent love for Mother Nature. Both Joe and Violet failed to get recognition and love from their mothers. It was this anguish and frustration that emerged from this lack of love which prompted them to come close to each other when Joe fell down in the lap of Violet under the walnut tree.

The walnut tree becomes symbolic of the healing power of Nature. It healed the anguished souls of the two characters who were separated from their Mother Nature. But, it was just a temporary solution for both Joe

and Violet. Violet for Joe was just a substitute of his mother Wild and for Violet, Joe was just a substitute of Golden Gray, whose stories she heard from True Belle. Golden Gray had instilled in Violet a desire to be white. So, under the walnut tree, Joe became the substitute of that desire. Later on when Violet came to know about Joe's affair with Dorcas, she admitted that how their marriage was just a way to find a substitute to their respective hunts and desires which they had harbored in their hearts for so long.

But temporary solutions never last long. The migration to the North split open their healed wounds once again as they were not permanently healed. Caught between the dichotomies of nature and culture, Joe and Violet once again went on the hunt for their wild past which was marked by their fractured relationship with Mother Nature. Joe assumed the role of hunter once again. In his hunt, he was stopped by Dorcas who touched him in such a way that he felt that his search of his mother Wild had come to an end. The trace marks on her face appeared to him as a track which marked the way he had lost all over these years. These marks Joe remembered were similar to the marks which Wild made on hunter's face when she bit him. These marks actually signified his path to self- understanding which wild Dorcas laid for him. Joe told that Dorcas was her true love. In case of Violet, it was she who chose Joe. Joe was just accepting Violet's choice. But with Dorcas it was completely different. He never chose Violet. She chose him. With Dorcas, he was the one who chose. Thus Dorcas became a dream girl for Joe. He showered all his love on Dorcas which he was not able to shower on Violet who was always busy with her birds and a doll in her arms.

But, Dorcas was an unloved child who had become a dangerous woman. Initially she faced rejection from her mother. Then, she lost



her parents in a fire, during East Louis Riots. Like other characters, Dorcas who was now orphan and homeless had to migrate to the city to stay in with her aunt Alice Manfred. Alice Manfred was a domineering woman and tried to regulate the life of Dorcas by her obsessive love and care. But Dorcas could not bear this domination. Alice wanted to protect her from the outside manly world of cruelties and tries to dress her up like a child. But, Dorcas, a teenager wanted to make herself look sexually desirable. Dorcas wanted to be admired by others. The lack of love from parents and consequent rebel in her asking for admiration converted Dorcas into a woman with a wild streak in her. And when she met Joe who was already on his hunt for the wild traces of his mother, he noticed this wild streak in her.

The wild Dorcas was thus hunted down by Joe. Joe had changed himself seven times since childhood. He wanted to change because he was in search of his self-identity. But he was not able to form one. It was Dorcas who put a full-stop to all these changes. The void which was created by Joe's mother and remained empty even with Violet finally got fulfilled by Dorcas.

Violet could not satisfy the wild hunt of Joe. Similarly, Joe couldn't satisfy the wild streak of Dorcas. Joe was always ready to submit to her demands and desires, and never questioned her. She, however, need an authoritative person, who could control her and shape her true identity. She felt that her identity was not shaped by Joe as he accepted her identity as it was Dorcas's boyfriend, Acton, however, helped her in shaping her self-identity. When Joe came to know about Acton, he could not comprehend the reasons for such a change in Dorcas's behaviour. In order to get the answers to his question, he went on to a final hunt for Dorcas. But, this time his hunt to

trace his wild mother, which was perhaps his last hunt, ended in killing Dorcas.

Thus Joe, Violet and Dorcas all three are symbolic of blacks who were deeply attached to their respective mothers, i.e. Mother Nature as hinted upon by Morrison through the name of Joe's mother Wild who represents the wilderness of nature. During slavery all three characters and their mothers faced innumerable tortures and exploitation at the hands of white owners. Mother Nature herself got trampled down and also bore a witness to the miserable living and exploitation of slaves. Wilderness of Mother Nature became a site of oppression thus posing a serious fragmented relationship between Mother Nature and blacks and gives readers an altogether different concept of motherhood to the readers.

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