

Maternal Loss and the Single Black Mother in Afro Caribbean Literature: An Analysis of Nalo Hopkinson's Midnight Robber

الفقدان الأمومي والأم العازبة السوداء في الأدب الإفريقي الكاريبي:
دراسة تحليلية لرواية سارق منتصف الليل للكاتبة نالو
هوبكنسون

Dr. Djedai Imen*

Received: .28/02/2023

Accepted: 13/09/2023

Published: 31/12/2023

Abstract:

This article aims to study the representation of maternal loss and the figure of the single black mother in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*. In order to help to define black motherhood, two relationships of black mothers-children are analyzed, in the twenty first century America, as follows: Tan Tan and her mother Ione, and Tan Tan and her baby boy Tubman. Black feminism is used as a theoretical framework to analyze the protagonist's socio-economic status and her identity development. Consequently, motherhood becomes a site of resistance through Tan Tan who fights against the intersectional paradigm of sexism and racism.

Key words: Tan Tan; Black single mother; Black Feminism; Mother-child relationship; Maternal loss.

*M' hamed Bougara University, Boumerdes,

i.djedai@boumerdes-univ.dz

ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة تصوير الفقدان الأمومي وكذا شخصية المرأة العازبة السوداء وذلك من خلال رواية سارق منتصف الليل للكاتبة نالو هوبكنسون. لقد تم تحليل علاقتين بين الأمهات والأطفال السود في أمريكا القرن الحادي والعشرين من أجل المساعدة على إعطاء مفهوم للأمومة السوداء وذلك على النحو التالي: تان تان ووالدتها إيون، تان تان وطفلها الرضيع تيمان. لقد تم استخدام النسوية السوداء كإطار نظري وذلك لتحليل الوضعية الاجتماعية والإقتصادية لبطلة الرواية وكذا تطور شخصيتها. كنتيجة لذلك، فالأمومة تصبح مركزا للمقاومة وذلك من خلال تان تان التي تحارب النموذج المتقاطع للتمييز على أساس الجنس والعنصرية.

كلمات مفتاحية: تان تان، المرأة العازبة السوداء، النسوية السوداء، العلاقة بين الأم وطفلها، الفقدان الأمومي.

Corresponding author: Dr.Djeddai Imen, i.djeddai@boumerdes-univ.dz

*** **

1. INTRODUCTION

Nalo Hopkinson is one of the well known Afro-Caribbean authors of the twenty first century. Her science fiction novel, *Midnight Robber*, tackles significant issues such as: the figure of a single black mother and maternal loss. Motherhood refers to the sacred and special relationship between a child and his/her mother. This unique bond is usually based on love and affection. However, black motherhood is influenced by the intersectional paradigm of sexism and racism. Therefore, this

article seeks to analyze the theme of black mother hood from two aspects. First, it focuses on the symbol of maternal loss in order to uncover the hidden past of Afro-Caribbean women and how it affects the present. Second, two relationships of black mothers-children, Tan Tan and her mother Ione, and Tan Tan and her baby boy Tubman, from two different stages of the protagonist's life, are analyzed to better understand the issue of black mother hood. Black feminism is used as a theoretical framework because it is relevant to the study. This article relies on the texts of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks since they explain in details the theme of black motherhood.

2. Black Feminism and Motherhood

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich states that "all human life in the planet is born of women" (1976, p. 11). According to her, motherhood refers to two things: "the potential motherhood" and "the institutional motherhood" (1976, p. 13). The first one focuses on the connection between a woman and her "powers of production" in addition to her babies (1976, p.13). The second one denotes patriarchy because social and political institutions maintain women's submission to men. This is why Andrea O'Reilly reveals that motherhood is "male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women" ("From," 2004, p. 2).

Black motherhood underwent several challenges and influenced by slavery. Afro-Caribbean women were taken by force by white men to the USA during the era of slavery. The mistreatment of black women remained in the memory. Black mothers were the victims of the institution of slavery and they

deprived of their economic and social rights. They experienced institutionalized racism and rape. In *Ain't I Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks considers rape “an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women” (1981, p. 27). Without their consent, black women became bearers of many children in order to satisfy their owners who believes that “mulattoes frequently brought a higher price on the market or easier to sell” (1981, p. 40). The process of selling mulattoes disconnected those children from their biological mothers. Children spent limited time with their mothers and Black women’s maternal rights were denied because of white men’s laws. According to Collins, “children born from enslaved Black women were slaves” (“Black,” 2000, p. 50). This reveals that the enslaved son/daughter does not belong to his/her mother. Therefore, Black feminists examine the theme of black motherhood in terms of separation between mother and child to uncover the hidden past of Afro-Caribbean women and how it affects the present.

According to La Frances Rodgers-Rose, an African woman plays many roles; she is the wife who is responsible for the household, and she is the mother who takes care of her children. Therefore, “no other person [except the mother...] has the ability to give birth, to ensure the ever-increasing number of ancestors, to link the past with the present (1980, p. 16). Consequently, the bond between the mother and his/her child is very close and strong.

In the era of slavery where the white regime dominated everything, Afro-Caribbean women were not allowed to enjoy

the feeling of being mothers. They were mistreated by white men and there was a highly rate of death among them (Rodgers-Rose, 1980, p. 18). However, enslaved mothers tried their best to raise their children. When they were in the plantations, they tied their babies to their back with cloth and, at night, they tried to have a meal with their older children (Moitt, 2001, p. 88). The abolition of slavery threatened the labor force and their economic status. Therefore, Angela Y. Davis demonstrates that,

In the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were “breeder”- animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers (1983, p. 7).

The bodies of slave women, who were the mothers of ten or more, became overused. Their health affected negatively by many miscarriages which sometimes led to death.

However, black motherhood becomes a site of resistance to the dominant culture where black females “learn the power of self-definition” in order to ensure their empowerment (Collins, “Black,” 2000, p. 176). This why Hopkinson tries to redefine the status of Black women as mothers.

3. Maternal loss and the Single Black Mother

3.1 Tan Tan and her Mother Ione

Midnight Robber tells the story of the black girl, Tan Tan, who lives on the planet of Toussaint. In this developed society, lives of citizens are controlled by an artificial intelligence called Granny Nanny. Tan Tan's Mother, Ione, is described as the most

beautiful and “loveliest [woman] in Cockpit County” (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 10). Ione is the wife of a wealthy man, Antonio, who is the “most powerful man in the whole county” (2000, p. 15). All what Ione thinks about is how to wear elegant dresses and how to “to look nice” (2000, p. 31) to attract others’ attention and this attitude affects negatively her daughter. Nursie takes care of Tan Tan and this makes the daughter nostalgic for her mother’s love. Instead of telling “any old time story” when her daughter feels down, Ione buys her “new toys” (2000, p. 30). In other words, she does not like “to bother up she self with stupidity” (2000, p. 30).

Ione subverts the conventions of motherhood. She becomes pregnant in order “to catch Antonio’s attention again” (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 46). In the day of Tan Tan’s birth, Ione gives her “a dry kiss on the tiny cheek” (2000, p.46). Instead of being loved by her mother, Tan Tan becomes a victim. Ione’s attitude towards her daughter resembles that one of a slave master since she considers Tan Tan as a property than as a human being. Hopkinson uses motherhood in the narrative as means to subvert gender roles since mothers are usually associated with the image of servants and nurtures of their children.

However, Hopkinson focuses on significance of the concept of other mothers. Collins defines this term as follows:

Women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities [...] Biological mothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise

or possible (“Meaning,” 1993, p. 47).

Hopkinson shows that mothering a child is not an exclusive duty of birth mothers. Surrogate mothers can get along with this role and develop deep relationships with children than their biological mothers. This is clearly shown in the novel when Ione hires Nursie to take care of daughter. Nursie spends most time with Tan Tan and she is the responsible of making meals and dressing her up. She also tells her stories at night. Therefore, O'Reilly explains that other mothering is a crucial thing to the “institution of black motherhood” and she considers it as a strategy of “survival,” developed by African American women, in order “to ensure” children’s “psychological and physical well-being and make their empowerment possible (“Toni,” 2004, p. 11).

When Antonio discovers that Ione cheats on him, he murders her lover, Quashee. In order to escape Granny Nanny’s decision, he travels with Tan Tan to the planet of New Half Way Tree via a small spaceship. Tan Tan is taken by force by her father to New Half Way Tree which is described as the planet of criminals and outlaws. Hopkinson wants to revive the Afro-Caribbean past of Black women through this image. In the era of slavery, slave masters sold enslaved children to other plantations. This is exactly what happened to Tan Tan. She is separated from her biological mother, Ione, and surrogate mother, Nursie. The worst thing is that people who go to New Half Way Tree cannot come back to Toussaint planet. Tan Tan becomes traumatized because she is not going to see Ione and Nursie forever,

Daddy? How Mummy go find we here? How she go know which Toussaint we come to? But Antonio

was already snoring. Truth to tell, Tan Tan was missing Nursie [...] just as much as Ione [...] She missed them. Her heart hurt when she remembered all the things she missed (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 66-77).

Tan Tan's feeling is similar to that of children who lost their mothers during slavery.

3.2 Tan Tan and her Baby Boy Tubman

In New Half Way Tree, Antonio rapes Tan Tan. According to Collins, rape is a “form of sexual violence” which “act to strip victims of their will to resist and make them passive and submissive to the will of the rapist” (“Black,” 2000, p. 135). Tan Tan is afraid to tell others about the incident and this facilitates Antonio's mission to rape her again. She discovers that she is pregnant and her stepmother, Janisette, blames her because she thinks that Melon head, Tan Tan's friend, is the father of the baby. She becomes very furious because she knows that mothering a child is not an easy task. Being a single mother during adolescence is very challenging. According to Collins, when mothers realize that “their daughters” are “pregnant,” they feel “cheated” (“Black,” 2000, 76).

When Tan Tan becomes sixteen, she murders Antonio. The Douens, alien creatures, welcome her in their community. When she gives birth to her son, Tubman, she becomes afraid how to raise him. She does not accept him at first because she considers him a “curse” (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 233). In Capitalist America, the socio-economic status becomes the main concern of black single mothers because “protecting Black children remains a primary concern of African-American mothers. Black

children are at risk for [...] poor nutrition, inferior housing [...] and a host of other social problems” (Collins, “black,” 197). Therefore, in order to save herself and son, she becomes the Robber Queen which is the female version of the Robber King from the Caribbean folklore. In “A Conversation with Nalo Hopkinson,” Hopkinson reveals that the Robber King declares that he is “the son of an African prince who’d been stolen into slavery [...] who’d escaped and become a robber in order to survive” (n. pag). According to Tan Tan, through this figure, “nothing can’t hurt she, not blackheart man, not nothing” (Hopkinson, 2000, 140). She defies the intersectional paradigm based on sexism and racism which is imposed on black single mothers.

Consequently, motherhood “can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment” (Collins, “Black,” p. 176). Abitefa, a female from the Douens, tells Tan Tan that her son is a “gift.” (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 233). Tan Tan finally realizes that her child Tubman is a source of “solace and love (Collins, “Black” p. 196).

4. CONCLUSION

This article has dealt with the theme of motherhood in Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* from different angles. It has analyzed two relationships of black mothers-children in the twenty first century America through using Black feminism as a theoretical framework. The protagonist, who is separated from biological mother, tries to adapt to the new environment. The incident of rape makes her aware of patriarchal society. Her son

Tubman gives her power to become the Robber Queen in order to survive. Thus, motherhood becomes a site of resistance which enables her to fight the intersectional paradigm of sexism and racism.

*** **

5. Bibliography:

1. Collins, P. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
2. ---, (1993). "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-daughters." *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters*. Eds. Patricia Bell-Scott, et al. New York: Harper Perennial. pp. 42-60.
3. Davis, A, Y. (1983). *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage books.
4. hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press.
5. Hopkinson, N. (2000). *Midnight Robber*. New York: Warner Books.
6. Moitt, B. (2001). *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
7. O'Reilly, A. (2004). Ed. *From Motherhood to Mothering: the Legacy of Adrienne Rich's of Woman Born*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
8. ---, (2004). *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. New York: SUNY Press.

9. Rodgers-Rose, L, F. (1980). "The Black Woman: A historical Overview." *The Black woman*. Ed. La France Rodgers-Rose. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications. pp. 15-25.
10. Rich, A. (1976). *Of Woman Born Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton.
11. "A Conversation with Nalo Hopkinson." (2007).*SF Site*. Accessed 10 May 2022.

<https://www.sfsite.com/03b/nh77.htm>