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The discourse of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in the novel Sula by Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Being an ideology, institution and experience, *motherhood* is an object of study of many authors. Many feminists recognize the significance of mother-daughter relationships and consider it the most powerful influence a woman can get in her life. By looking back into the past of their mothers, some of the female authors try to identify themselves and “pave the way” for their own daughters. The main question that emerges in this research is concerned with the way women are shaped as mothers under the influence of the family and the society.

The aim of this paper is to present the discourse of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationships in the novel *Sula* by using the theories of discourse by Foucault, (1982) Bakhtin, (1981) Macdonell (1986), Lazar (2005), van Dijk (2008), the sociological theories of Chodorow (1978) and Donath (2015) and the feminist theories on motherhood as proposed by Ruddick (1989, 1986), Hays (1998), DiQuinzio, (1999) and Ross (2016) among others.

Keywords: motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, family, society.

Introduction

Motherhood is defined as a cultural concept in which women put their identity in the capacity to raise children. This means, it is shaped by the culture the woman lives in. Aspects of motherhood vary significantly from the society and the family in which women are brought up and spend their lives. Thus, motherhood is influenced both by the society and the mutual relations with other women in the family.

The “mother” concept is very frequent in the work of feminist authors. Many feminists recognize the fact that the analysis of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships is very significant and consider it the most important point of their interest. White feminists, for example, demonstrate a sense of loss and betrayal by their mothers, whom they view as complicit in their own oppression. In contrast, women of color were more likely to respect their mothers’ struggles while they were keenly aware of the price their mothers had paid to survive. The traditional oral rhetoric, as well the strong influence of women in their own families significantly inspired Toni Morrison to present the way the African-American women form their identity as mothers going through excruciating and painful circumstances.

Sula, Morrison's second novel, focuses on a young black girl named Sula, who matures into a strong and determined woman in the face of adversity and the distrust, even hatred, of her by the African-American community in which she lives. Morrison explores the strong female relationships between the novel's women and how these bonds both nurture and threaten individual female identity. Also, she questions to what extent mothers will go to protect their children from a harsh world, and whether or not these maternal instincts ultimately are productive or harmful.

Published in 1973 the novel *Sula* provides a perfect image for the position of the African-American women in the last century. Among other issues, it examines the dynamics of family life and friendship and the expectations for conformity within the community. It also represents the complex images of mothers and turbulent mother-daughter relationships. In this sense, the main focus of interest of our research are the female characters in the novel, built upon their intertwined mutual relations and the way they are shaped by the imposed influence of the patriarchal discourse.

Freidan (1998) thinks that we can never be certain what women can achieve if they are free to express themselves, and “what women can become when they are finally free to become themselves. Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? The time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women to become complete.” (p. xviii)

This quote by Betty Friedan defines the main aim of this research, which is to present the discourse of motherhood and the way it is defined and shaped under the influence of the social surrounding. The object of this paper is the novel *Sula* and its main female characters presented by Toni Morrison.

Theoretical background

Before moving to the main discussion on motherhood we will swiftly introduce the analytical framework to support the main argument of this research. The term “discourse” as used in this paper can closely be observed through the discourse theory of Macdonnel (1986) who provides social definition of discourse. She bases her research on the work of several theorists among which the most predominant are Bakhtin (1981) and Foucault

(1982) and comes to a conclusion that the discourse is formed during our everyday activities. The way we talk and write is shaped by the structures of power in the society being defined as a constant battle and conflict among different discourses. The words, the expressions and the forms of knowledge applied in the institutions (educational, religious and media) gain political dimension under the pressure of the forces in the society. Macdonell (1986) shows how the central understanding of the discourse, as a political and social instrument can easily disperse into several different critical theories and ideologies. According to her, the predominant discourse in the society is formed under the influence of power. Discourses and the ways they reproduce power are the different in different cultures. Van Dijk (2008) thinks that the members of different culture may understand and use these discourses in different ways in accordance with their culturally shared knowledge and attitudes. In this sense he advances his theory by defining the relationship between discourse and power and presents a definition of social power according to which "it is a property of the relationship between groups, classes or other social constructs or even between persons as members of the society". (p.29). According to Lazar (2005) the power relations between men and women are similar to those between dominated and subordinate classes and ethnic groups. What is different is the everyday context in which these power relationships are exercised. This puts the nature of gender as an oppressive factor in most social practices.

Motherhood as an ideology, institution and experience is a subject of research of many feminist authors. The mother-daughter relationship becomes even more interesting topic for discussion for the second generation of feminists who identify themselves with their mothers on many levels and investigate into their mothers' lives in order to discover the significance of their own. For the purpose of this paper we will refer to the

sociological theories of Chodorow (1978), Klein (1983) and Donath (2015) and the feminist theories of Ruddick (1989, 1986) Hays (1998) DiQuinzio, (1999) and Ross (2016). They base their work on the premise that the mother-daughter relationship is extremely significant in establishing female identity. It encourages important historical and psychological issues about the position and role of women in the past, and it embarks on the relations among the family members and their influence on the female identity. Encouraged by the position of mothers and mother-daughter relationship in the traditional discourse, these authors try to “remove off” the burden imposed to women by the patriarchal inheritance. In this sense it is significant, that for the purpose of our research we should remove the motherhood from the patriarchal framework and closely observe it aside from pre-supposed male control and domination.

Motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in *Sula*

The novel *Sula* is a novel of duality. Central to it are the female characters that represent the extreme opposites of the female nature. The main characters of the novel are two friends Sula and Nel. Later the author introduces the characters of their mothers Hannah and Helen and Sula’s grandmother Eva. Each woman has her own story to share. It seems that they strongly want to be their own creators of their destiny, but at the end they realize that they did the same as their mothers.

The theory of Chodorow (1978) which is in large extent applied in the representation of the discourse of motherhood in this paper is based on the psychoanalytic representations of the motherhood and the theory of the mother as an object. In the traditional psychoanalytic theory, the mother-daughter relationship is represented from the daughter’s perspective. In this way, the daughter is always subject to analysis and the story

is told from her point of view while the mother is an object of analysis and is always represented by the relationship with her daughter. Her own perspective is used only when she represents herself as a daughter of her mother. Even then, the mother is an object of analysis and not the subject.

This theory simplifies the description of motherhood and first discusses the mother-child relationship in order to move on to describing the more specific mother-daughter relationship. The main concern here (Chodorow, 1978) is why the mothers “perform” the motherhood instead of the fathers. Then, we continue to the question of the impact the mother-daughter relationship has on the formation of the identity of girls. The answer to this question is found in the fact that there is a systematic biological difference between males and females. Chodorow (1978) bases this theory on the object-relations theory (Klein, 1983) which starts off with the premise that the psychological life of a single individual is formed under the influence of the personal relations with other individuals. She begins with the description of the process of having a mother, which is quite different experience for the male and female children. Even though they all establish an emotional relation with their mother, their relationship is gradually changing. When reaching the school age, the boys start to identify themselves with their father (or opposed to their mother), while the girls continue their identification with the mother.

The novel *Sula* is no exception to the above statement. The female characters are built within the interpersonal relations, but it is almost always that the mother’s influence is the strongest. For example, in the case of Sula, she is always compared to her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva. It is the same with the character of Nel. Her character is also built under the strong influence of her mother Helen.

Chodorow (1978) says that society plays a great role in defining the role of women and that “women’s mothering does not exist in isolation. It is a fundamental constituting feature of the sexual division of labor. As part of the sexual division of labor, it is structurally and causally related to other institutional arrangements and to ideological formulations which justify the sexual division of labor.” (p.32)

The girls do not only acquire the process of becoming mothers by acting out the appropriate gender roles, but they learn it under the influence of their mothers, which in large amount is determined by the social context. (Chodorow, 1978)

The setting of Morrison’s novel has a great role over the identity formation of Sula and Nel. For Nel’s mother, the opinion of other people extremely matters. In order to cover up her true origin, she decides to live her life in the new community to the utmost moral standards.

Morrison (2005) describes Helen Wright as an impressive woman and as “a woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority. Since there was no Catholic church in Medallion then, she joined the most conservative black church. And held sway.” (p. 18)

Contrary to her, Hannah does not pay much attention to other people’s comments. Even though she is known for her low morale, she never thinks of changing her personality in order to confirm her belonging to the community.

Morrison (2005) gives completely opposite description of Hannah since “she exasperated the women in the town-the “good” women, who said, “One thing I can’t stand is a nasty woman”; the whores, who were hard put to find trade among black men anyway and who resented Hannah’s generosity; the middling women, who had both husbands and affairs, because Hannah seemed to unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationships and being wholly incapable of jealousy.” (p.44)

Even though completely opposite, the influence of Helen on the one hand, and the influence of Hannah on the other are extremely important in identity formation of their daughters Sula and Nel. Life led by strict moral rules turns Nel into a perfect young woman always prepared to meet the needs of others. Contrary to her, Sula, under the influence of her mother, turns into a selfish woman, seemingly incapable of loving anyone but herself.

Motherhood is one of the rare universal and permanent elements of the gender division of labor. This shows that even when we consider different cultures in which the gender division of labor and mother-daughter relationships are defined differently, motherhood is still the only thing performed solely by women. At the same time, motherhood is not fixed, but fluctuant and to a large degree dependent on the social and cultural context in which it occurs. The mothers are expected to establish constant emotional relationship with their children, which will prepare them for life outside the family. According to this study (Chodorow, 1978) motherhood doesn't only consist of raising children, feeding and dressing them, but also of their psychological preparation for the world around them.

DiQuinzio (1997) goes beyond this statement. She coins the phrase "essential motherhood" which is closely related to the femininity and is thus natural and unavoidable to women. It has the need for female exclusiveness and undivided attention and care for children which is based on the female psychological and emotional capacity for empathy, awareness for the needs of others and self-sacrifice. The subjectivity of personality requires unified, selfish and rational agent. But the motherhood which begins with the limitations of the pregnant body neither remains a unity, nor provides an opportunity for such interpretation. As a result, motherhood and subjectivity in modern culture are at odds with each other. Hence, motherhood is significant for the

feminist theorists since it emphasizes the dilemma “difference as opposed to equality” for many feminist issues.

The ideology of “intense motherhood” wraps around as a foil to the competitive search for an identity in the public and the professional sphere. This raises the social standards for the motherhood on an unrealistic level. Thus, mothers become responsible for raising children which is painstaking, emotional and financially expensive work. The great social ambivalence leads to the greater idealization of motherhood. Intensive mothering has its belittlers which become evident as the woman progresses into her role as a mother. The demands on her time and engagement are extreme and very often stressful and overwhelming. Mothers who attempt to engage in intensive mothering also feel intense guilt when they leave their children in the care of others or, as is sometimes the case, alone. Their sense of accomplishment in other spheres of life, such as work outside the home, is often undermined by chronic ambivalence about the morality of their choices and the adequacy of their mothering. (Hays, 1998).

Ruddick (1989,1996) goes even beyond this theory of maternal thinking that presumes motherhood is a “practice grounded in thought”. According to her, although pregnancy and mothering include acts and feelings that are unique to women, specific activities associated with the work (practice) of mothering can be shared by men. Doing so, only requires us to be willing to demystify and degender mothering ideology long enough to consider the possibilities. At the end, Ruddick points out that maternal thinking is a way in which men and women can act to undermine and change the patriarchal constructs that are responsible for women’s oppression with respect to motherhood.

Ross (2016) thinks that the modern society has the ability to understand motherhood and mothering in different light. The

larger context and the cultural backgrounds have always influenced the way how these concepts were understood. She furthers her statement by pointing out that there are still social and cultural pressures that promote idealized roles of motherhood for women.

The women in Peace family do not fit into the motherly roles as defined by the public opinion. Eva Peace tries hard to be a good mother and provide for her family. Even though she physically sacrifices herself in order to provide financial support for her children, emotionally she doesn't relate to them, which leaves them deprived of motherly love. This failure as a mother results in her daughter's failure to become a good mother. Hannah is only interested in herself and her own adventures, which strongly influences Sula. In this sense we can mention the notion of regretting over motherhood. Donath (2015) thinks that since motherhood is neither a universal experience for each woman, nor it can be experienced identically, the mothers can regret motherhood. This regret may be seen as a result of the personal failure to adapt to the overall concept of motherhood and to the parading of a good mother implying that the mother should try harder and do better.

Considering the double failure of her grandmother and her mother, Sula decides never to become a mother herself. She gradually becomes aware that the process of motherhood would be a complete disaster, so she ends up her life completely alone. This leads us to what Chodorow (1978) explains as a continuation of motherhood. She thinks that in the relationship with her daughter, the mother unconsciously repeats the same uncertainties and identifications she had experienced with her own mother. Thus, the mother is trying to connect to her daughter more as a continuation of herself rather than as a separate person. It additionally aggravates the process of identity formation for the daughter.

For the two friends Sula and Nel identity formation is a painful process. Even though they strongly fight with their own past, still they never manage to separate from their mothers. As absurd as it seems, they both end up the same as their mothers.

Besides being a novel of the mother-daughter relationships, *Sula* is also a novel of female psychological development opposing the traditional male interpretation of the role of women and it offers a new approach in defining the female paradigm. The ethnicity and the social status of women in *Sula* also matters a lot. In this way Morrison implicitly directs her work towards presenting characters that are double marginalized. On the one hand, they are female, and on the other, they are African-American women living in a patriarchal setting. With this, Morrison emphasizes the negative influence of the external factors such as racism and poverty on the definition of mother-daughter relationship. These factors also influence the process of motherhood and the identity formation process of each individual. The influences of the racial and social status are intertwined and cannot be separately discussed. They, to a great extent, determine the mother-daughter relationship. In *Sula*, Morrison depicts the influence of the social belonging by using the different social status of the Wright and Peace families –the first presented as a middle-rank, whereas the second presented as a family of lower social rank. In both families, the mother-daughter relationships are constantly under pressure due to the social influence. For example, Eva Peace cannot offer motherly love to Hannah. In cruel social conditions for a single African-American woman, only survival is the question of importance. Because of the racial and social influence, Eva is not able to commit fully to motherhood, which strongly influences her relationship with Hannah and the way she understands motherhood. As a result of this, Hannah never learns how to be a mother and this process is only repeated by her daughter.

The situation with the Wright family can also be considered as a reflection of the racial and social influence of the mother-daughter relationship. Helen is also unable to establish a relationship with her daughter because of her moral expectations. She imposes her expectations to Nel, constantly forcing her to change. But Nel never lives up to her mother's standards. She spends her life without a full recognition of her mother. Despite all her efforts to live her life in a completely different way from her mother, she sadly ends up the same. The life of Sula and Nel is under the great influence of their mothers' past. The life paths of mothers and daughters in *Sula* are deeply intertwined. Even though all daughters, at some point in their lives wanted to become different from their mothers, at the end they come to realize that they failed. Only Sula remains outside the circle of motherhood since she doesn't become mother, but by having an extramarital affair she demonstrates that she is not ready for a conventional life. Nel, once prepared to be the creator of her own story ends up trapped in life imposed by the conventions and expectations of the society. Limited by the social and racial influence, she doesn't want to disrupt the process of motherhood. Even though the daughters try to create their own identity, the mother-daughter relationships remain the most significant factor in the development of their identities.

Mother-daughter relationships in *Sula* are also affected by the lack of a father figure. The families of Peace and Wright almost lack father figures. From the beginning of the novel we understand that the man in Peace family had long left the town because he was incapable of accepting the commitment to raise children. Later, Hannah's husband died while very young, which left Sula fatherless, raised only by her mother and her grandmother. Nel's father is also absent from the family picture. For most of the time he is away working and misses almost all of the family events. It is expected that there is always an

understanding if a man's career commitments compete with his paternal identity. The idea by Lazar (2005) of "the absent father" becomes understandable only in the case of men. (p.156) This absence of male influence leads to emerging powerful females who strongly affect the concept of family life. The lack of father figure, according to Chodorow (1978) leads to breaking up the relationship with the patriarchy. Since there is only insignificant male presence in their life, the female characters are mostly formed under the female influence. As stated before, they are shaped by the influence of the other family members and the invisible power of patriarchy presented by the influence of the small community in Medallion.

Conclusion

The novel *Sula* is a typical feminist novel. It represents exceptional female characters; characters of mothers, some of who sacrifice for their children, and characters of rebellious daughters not always agreeing with their mothers' points of view. For the most part, the novel is narrated from the daughters' perspective. Hence, we can easily see how they feel about their mothers, but the opposite point of view is scarcely present. This is even obvious in the structure of the novel which is mostly circular and pointed towards identity formation of the two friends Sula and Nel (both daughters) and their own perception of the mother-daughter relationship. There are only few segments within the story when we see the mothers' standpoint of view.

The aim of this paper was to discuss the discourse of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationships.

The discourse of motherhood presented in this novel has been analyzed and discussed with reference to the theories of discourse with respect to the social, psychoanalytical and

feminist theories. The research into mother-daughter relationships and its influence on the identity development of the daughters led us to the conclusion that *Sula* is packed with formal moves against social structures. On the surface, Nel and Sula may appear as polar opposites, dissimilar characters with divergent world views, though Morrison's nuanced character portrayals and overall narrative construction resists any attempt at settling into static binary oppositions, including those that might hold varying expressions of motherhood. On the much deeper level, we see the complexity of the women we encounter in the novel. They are multi-dimensional beings with equally complex familial relationships which strongly affects their identity.

The beauty of Morrison's narrative is its complexity and its ability to illustrate the fluidity and valences of the black female subject as captured in the every day life. McDowell (1989) underscores this point, arguing against regarding black women's lives as homogenous, "they have not developed in a vacuum, but, rather in a complex social framework that includes interaction with black men, white men, and white women, among diverse social groups and subgroups". (p.54)

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