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**OF WOMEN BONDS:  
MOTHERHOOD, SISTERHOOD AND  
THE ETHICS OF CARE IN TONI  
MORRISON'S *SULA* AND *A MERCY***

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**OF WOMEN BONDS: MOTHERHOOD,  
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by  
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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I analyze Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy*, concentrating on women bonds. I focus specifically on motherhood and sisterhood as the women characters are constantly affected by such relationships. The present works are discussed in the light of feminist and black feminist theories. I show that in *Sula* there are different types of mothering, demonstrating that the characters challenge stereotypes usually associated with the black mother. I also argue that mother-daughter bonds are not limited to biological connections, as illustrated by *A Mercy*. In both novels, mother-daughter bonds greatly affect the women characters' subjectivities, even if not always positively. Furthermore, I investigate the intensive sisterhood bonding in *Sula* and other types of sisterhood in *A Mercy*. I suggest that sisterhood has many forms and is not limited to bonds among black women. Through these friendships, the characters are able to shape their own subjectivities and struggle for empowerment. However, the alteration of the ethics of care causes many women bonds to rupture as the characters resort to unconventional actions to survive in a patriarchal society marked by a tradition of slavery. Consequently, characters suffer different consequences from the severing of their women bonds. I claim that, because of the changes in the ethics of care, the women characters' actions cannot be judged according to essentialist paradigms of good and bad.

## RESUMO

Nesta dissertação, analiso as obras *Sula* e *A Mercy* de Toni Morrison, refletindo sobre os laços estabelecidos entre as personagens femininas. Enfoco especificamente a maternidade e a irmandade entre as mulheres, demonstrando como essas questões influenciam profundamente o comportamento das personagens. As narrativas em questão são discutidas sob o enfoque das teorias feministas e da crítica literária feminista afro-americana. Argumento que em *Sula* as diferentes formas de maternidade revelam como as personagens desafiam estereótipos usualmente associados à mãe negra. Também discuto como os laços materno-filiais não são limitados a fatores biológicos, assim como ilustrado em *A Mercy*. Em ambas narrativas, os laços materno-filiais exercem grande influência nas subjetividades das personagens femininas, ainda que nem sempre de forma positiva. Além disso, investigo o intenso laço de irmandade e amizade em *Sula* e outros tipos de vínculos de amizade presentes em *A Mercy*. Sugiro que esses laços adquirem várias formas e não são limitados a elos somente entre mulheres negras. Por meio desses laços de irmandade e amizade as personagens moldam a própria subjetividade e lutam pelo próprio fortalecimento e por empoderamento. Contudo, a alteração da ética do cuidado causa a ruptura de vários laços entre as personagens, pois essas recorrem a ações não convencionais para sobreviverem em uma sociedade patriarcal marcada por uma tradição escravocrata. Consequentemente, as personagens sofrem o efeito dessa descontinuidade de seus laços de forma variada. Argumento que, devido a essa mudança na ética do cuidado, as personagens femininas não podem ser julgadas de acordo com paradigmas essencialistas como sendo simplesmente boas ou ruins

## Introduction

Hell's twins, slavery and silence,  
came later. Still you were like no other. Not  
because you suffered more or longer, but  
because of what you knew and did before,  
during, and following that suffering. No one  
knew your weight until you left them to  
carry their own. But you knew.

(Morrison, *A Knowing So Deep* 32)

African American literature has become an important part of the literary tradition of American Literature. As an African American writer, Toni Morrison has contributed significantly to the discussion about African American literature and literary criticism – especially that produced by black women writers – through her literary works and critical essays. In many of her novels, Morrison challenges preconceived ideas and depicts the implications of being a black woman during and after slavery. Most of Morrison's women characters are affected by bonds that constantly shape their lives. My work examines Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *A Mercy* (2008) focusing on motherhood, sisterhood, and the alteration of the ethics of care that weakens these bonds. I argue that in these novels the bonds that bring the women characters together – be they the ties of motherhood or sisterhood – deeply influence their subjectivities in many different ways. Consequently, any change in the ethics of care inevitably affects these emotional ties, the characters' lives and their sense of selves. Although men have significant roles in both narratives I focus primarily on the women characters and their bondings.

*Sula* starts with a description, by a third person omniscient narrator, of the Bottom community, a neighborhood out in the suburbs of the city of Medallion, in Ohio, inhabited mostly by African Americans and Irish immigrants. It is described as an area that “stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom” (3). The land is first given to a former slave, who accepts the land as a reward for his lifetime’s work. The narrator describes the deal as: “A joke. A nigger joke” (4). The joke is that the slave is tricked into believing that the valley, or the good land, was at the top of the hill, when in fact, it was poor land in which nothing grew and was far from downtown. Even so, a community is created as other families settle there. After this explanation about the area and the community, a character named Shadrack is introduced. He is a former soldier of the US army who comes back from the war disoriented and, thus, settles in the community establishing a mysterious holiday: The National Suicide Day. Although a discussion about this character is beyond the scope of this thesis, a reference to Shadrack and the bad omen surrounding the Bottom area is present throughout the narrative. In the third chapter, the narrator introduces Nel and her mother Helene who are going to New Orleans for Helene’s grandmother’s funeral. The novel is set between 1920 and 1960 and traces the sisterhood between two best friends: Sula and Nel. Both are African Americans and, although they live in the same community, the Bottom, they are raised in completely different households. Nel is raised by her conservative mother Helene, away from her grandmother Rochelle and Sula is raised by her unorthodox mother, Hannah, and her hardworking grandmother Eva.

If there is an invisible and inevitable force that guides the narratives of *Sula* and *A Mercy*, it is the bonds among the women characters, especially those of



motherhood and sisterhood. Even though Wyatt Mason argues in his book review that in Morrison's *A Mercy*, the "gravitational center is dead Jacob Vaark," (35) I contend that the novel actually presents women bonding as the connecting thread not only among some of the characters, but as an important theme throughout the narrative as well. In *A Mercy*, the chapters alternate between Florens's versions of events and a third person omniscient narrator. The narrative opens with Florens writing, an act which is already unconventional, because she, a young slave girl, is able to read and write. She then introduces the two women characters that most influence her life: her mother and Lina, thus signaling the importance of the relationships among women that runs through the story. In the novel there is no reference to Florens's mother's name. She is only addressed as Florens's mother or sometimes as "minha mãe," as they learned some of the language used by their Portuguese owners. *A Mercy* takes place in 1680's during the early colonization of the United States of America and at the beginning of the institutionalization of slavery. The novel focuses on the relationships among four women: Rebekka, the white European immigrant married to Jacob; and the slaves Jacob buys - Sorrow, an African girl who is the only survivor of a slave ship; Lina, a Native American whose tribe was wiped out; and Florens, an African American girl who is bought at an early age.

While reading *Sula* and *A Mercy*, I was intrigued by the recurring references to motherhood and sisterhood among characters because, despite the different time frame of each novel, these references demonstrate strong ties between the two novels. In fact, the discussion of motherhood in both novels is seen as well in Morrison's earlier and more famous novel, *Beloved* (1987). The novel also examines the bonds among women, specifically among the characters of Sethe, Denver and

Beloved. Even so, a complete analysis of *Beloved* is beyond the scope of this study especially because the bonds in *Beloved* have a different, more supernatural quality verging on magical realism, as critics have observed, unlike the experiences portrayed in *Sula* and *A Mercy*. Nevertheless, references to the theme in *Beloved* are addressed occasionally to add to the discussion when necessary.

Both novels are analyzed in the light of feminist literary criticism, African American criticism, black feminist criticism and the recent theorization on Africana Womanism. Although black feminist criticism has much in common with feminist criticism and African American criticism, black feminist criticism arises from what some critics see as the failure of both movements to address the concerns of black women. Many authors, such as Deborah McDowell, contribute to the rise of black feminist criticism by recovering writings by black women and questioning the literary canon. The notion of a universal experience of womanhood has been replaced over the years by a plurality of women's experience. Black feminist criticism has given rise to a renewed feminist agenda that includes an even more complex study of power relations. It still faces many challenges, but there is a growing number of critics and creative writers who focus on the subject.

Several contemporary critics, such as bell hooks and Carole Boyce Davies, Barbara Smith and Clenora Hudson-Weems, have provided continuous and sound theoretical basis for the understanding of the peculiarities of black women's fiction and its implications. Discussing African American fiction, hooks asks important questions, such as: "How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?" (*Yearning* 15). Thus, hooks contributes with different inquiries that

enrich theoretical and literary texts as critics and authors search for alternative paradigms to depict black culture. Along the same lines, Davies argues that “the category Black woman, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities” (8). This statement shows the importance of considering the heterogeneous experiences of women while analyzing literary works. Moreover, in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith suggests that sexual and racial politics are inseparable for black women writers and stresses that black women writers do have a strong literary tradition (416). Smith’s argument provides much of the basis for a comparison between the women characters in Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy* as they are analyzed from a perspective that emphasizes issues of race and gender.

Hudson-Weems, on the other hand, employs the term “Africana Womanism” to denote what she sees as a new paradigm and theoretical work that focus primarily on race and community (xix-xxi). Recent authors have joined the complex discussion by formulating a debate about black feminist criticism and Africana Womanism in an attempt to understand black women’s esthetics and critical theories. It is important to consider that Alice Walker first mentions the term “womanist” in a long epigraph to her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983). She lists four possible meanings of the term, such as: “a black feminist or feminist of color . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (xi). Walker’s pioneer use of the term womanist contributes to the rise of the discussion among critics about the implications of such terminology. Hudson-Weems states that what she calls Africana Womanist Literary Theory is a “new terminology coupled with a new paradigm, [which] expressed

discontent with other female-based constructs that had not clearly expressed an agenda for Africana women relative to the prioritizing of their triple plight” (3). She adds that “Africana people have long been denied not only the authority of naming self, but, moreover, of defining self” (18). Thus, Hudson-Weems suggests that there is a need for a new terminology to analyze black women’s literature, a theory that constantly emphasizes the importance of race and class in Africana women’s literature and political movements. Despite the criticism it has received, the recent discussion about Africana Womanist theory is considered in my analysis of Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy*, as both novels belong to an African American and an Africana women context. Furthermore, Hudson-Weems’s study of sisterhood in the chapter entitled “Genuine Sisterhood or Lack Thereof” in her critical work *Africana Womanist Literary Theory* provides relevant sources for the discussion of women bonds in both novels. Therefore, consideration is given to both black feminist criticism and Africana Womanism, comparing and contrasting their most important aspects. However, contrary to Hudson-Weems’s premises that race and class should be prioritized, this thesis considers race, gender, and class to be intrinsically linked and, therefore, these “multiple subject positions” and “constituents of identity”, as Susan Friedman refers to them (21-34), should be studied together.

Morrison’s critical works have also influenced literary criticism as she often depicts in her fiction and critical works the context within which she writes. In *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, she discusses the literary canon and what should or should not be included “in order to suggest ways of addressing the Afro-American presence in American literature that require neither slaughter nor reification” (368). In Morrison’s review of *Portraits in Fact and Fiction*, edited by Mel Watkins and Jay David, she states: “High on the list of things-to-be-demythicalized is the black

woman, and the editors of this anthology propose to dispel ‘some of the illusions and misconceptions concerning black women.’ They succeed handsomely in confirming them” (100). She is very critical and goes on to say: “Maya Angelou’s book is picked through to find a section illustrating the ‘self-doubt’ that plagues black women. . . . Somewhere there is, or will be, an in-depth portrait of the black woman” (102). She questions the portrayal of black women in these works and many others while also creating women characters in her literary works that move beyond stereotypes.

In this context, I argue in this thesis that motherhood and sisterhood in *Sula* and *A Mercy* help the women characters shape their subjectivities, fight against victimization and struggle for empowerment, but the alteration of ethics of care often weakens women bonds. In order to fulfill my objectives and support my claim, this work is divided into three chapters that focus primarily on the issues of motherhood, sisterhood and the ethics of care in both novels. Although these women bonds have much in common, I believe it is important to separate each type of bond in specific chapters to highlight their peculiarities. Also present in the novels is the alteration of the ethics of care which causes many of these women bonds to rupture. In this sense, the last chapter discusses how this change in an ethics of care affects the women characters and their relationships.

Chapter 1, “Motherhood in *Sula* and *A Mercy*,” consists of an analysis of mother-daughter bonds in Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy*, as it shapes the narratives and the characters’ lives. The women characters have strong feelings towards their mothers or towards women who play this role, even if they are not positive feelings. In the novels, motherhood is not portrayed only according to stereotypes associated with the black mother. In fact, Morrison challenges the notion that all black women are designed to be great mothers or simply sexually promiscuous. According to

Davies's arguments about the boundaries of motherhood, Morrison's novels can be said to: "problematize the mother rather than romanticize her" (145). Both novels challenge the notion that all black women are inherently good and nurturing mothers even if such a concept is possible. To illustrate the peculiarities of motherhood during slavery, the relationship between Florens and her mother in *A Mercy* is analyzed. Then, the different types of motherhood in *Sula* are discussed through the Peace women, Sula, Hannah and Eva, and the Wright women, Rochelle, Helene, and Nel.

Moreover, in the first chapter I discuss how motherhood is not limited to biological connections as different women characters come to act as mothers and daughters. In *Sula*, Eva owns a pension and she takes various children into her house that are either abandoned or have no place to go. Eva acts as a mother to these kids and to many characters that live, even if temporarily, in her pension. In *A Mercy*, Lina and Florens become mother and daughter, respectively, to each other. Both women are in need of care and affection, and together they are able to create an enriching bond.

The second chapter, "Sisterhood in Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy*," focuses on sisterhood. In both novels there are different types of sisterhood, as some bonds are more intense and long-lasting while others are more formal and brief. In *Sula*, special attention is given to the sisterhood between Sula and Nel. As they are both young black girls living in the Bottom, they rely on each other to overcome their hardships. Their bonding is intense and powerful and they are so close that many times they become just like the other. As a consequence, these bonds directly affect their subjectivities. The term subjectivity, used throughout this thesis, is based on Donald Hall's arguments "that subjectivity implies a degree of thought and self-

consciousness about identity” (3), as is the case with the women characters discussed in both novels, who slowly become aware of their own selves and their identities. Subjectivity also implies a more flexible concept. In this sense, the term is appropriate to delineate a flexible sense of self and, at the same time, a consciousness of one’s identity.

Also addressed in Chapter 2 are the different forms of sisterhood present in *A Mercy*. When Rebekka is aboard the ship crossing the Atlantic, she meets different women and their bonding is crucial for her. Through their sisterhood, the women are free to share their experiences and beliefs, and Rebekka becomes more confident to face the New World and her new husband. Moreover, it is suggested in this thesis that sisterhood is present among women characters of different races and ethnicities. The term ethnicity is used to refer to the particular culture, tradition, language and ancestry of individuals. It differs from race because it does not assume that the characters are divided into genetically-fixed determinants, but gives importance to time and place. Race and colonialism may be “imbued with the same impetus to draw a binary distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive’ and the same necessity for the hierarchization of human types” (Ashcroft, et. al. 198). Although this thesis does not in any way endorse this hierarchization according to biological imperatives, the term race is also used and cannot be ignored because it is so strongly rooted in common usage. However, it is important to note that the term denotes a significant difference among individuals; that is, discrimination is inherent in the term. To ignore the term would be to pretend that all individuals are treated completely equally without suffering any marginalization. I argue for an alignment between individuals from different “races” and ethnicities as a way to destabilize these distinctions and maybe one day not to have to use the word race.

Through the portrayal of various women bonds, *A Mercy* illustrates the possibility of sisterhood among women from different races and ethnicities. The bonding between Florens and Jane, a white girl from a Presbyterian community is very important for Florens because she helps her to escape. Their sisterhood is possible because they empathize with each other's difficulties. The friendship between Lina and Rebekka takes time to develop as they are both not sure how to behave. Soon they are put together to execute chores around the farm and through sisterhood they are able to overcome the difficulties imposed by the wilderness and, thus, manage to survive.

Chapter 3, "The Alteration of the Ethics of Care," focuses on how the alteration of the ethics of care causes the severing of many women bonds in *A Mercy* and *Sula*. I argue that the expression ethics of care is marked by solidarity among individuals, with mutual acts of concern and care. An in depth analysis of such term is elaborated on the last chapter. Although the women bonds of motherhood and sisterhood can have many positive aspects in the lives of the characters, most of these bonds do not outlast the contradictions that women experience during and after slavery. To endure the hardships, the women characters are forced to make unconventional compromises and to resort to different actions. Even though the change in the ethics of care does not necessarily represent lack of solidarity among the characters, the discrepancy of behavior and expectation weakens many women relationships in both novels. To illustrate this alteration of the ethics of care in the mother-daughter bond, the relationship between Eva and her children Hannah and Plum, as well as between Hannah and her daughter Sula are analyzed. Similarly, I argue that *A Mercy* also illustrates how the bonding between Florens and her mother is affected by the alteration of the ethics of care. Then, I discuss how sisterhood



suffers from such modifications. Nel and Sula's rupture in *Sula*, as well as Lina and Sorrow's misunderstanding and, Rebekka's relationship with the other women in *A Mercy* shed light on the discussion about how, as the women characters resort to unconventional actions, their sisterhood is affected by the alteration of the ethics of care.

In addition, emphasis is given to how the women characters cope with the discontinuity of women bonds. Some characters have haunted dreams and memories, such as Florens in *A Mercy* and, Sula and Nel in *Sula*. In fact, their relationships can face difficulties because of the alteration of the ethics of care. Florens and Sula, for example, are unable to establish a lasting and emotionally balanced relationship. Likewise, Florens suffers from her traumatic experience of mother-daughter miscommunications, caused by the alteration of the ethics of care. She becomes mentally unstable and, consciously or not, she resorts to violent acts as a response to the alteration of the ethics of care which deeply affects her. Therefore, I argue that the women characters cannot be judged as simply good or bad because their social, cultural and historical experiences, as well as their subjectivities have to be taken into consideration.

The conclusion highlights the main points of the thesis through a succinct discussion of the key topics. It emphasizes how in *Sula* and *A Mercy* women bonds are relevant to characters and greatly affect them. It is suggested that motherhood and sisterhood lead to many positive aspects in the lives of the women characters, but the context of slavery and its aftermath cause an alteration of the ethics of care that weakens women bonds. Solidarity is nevertheless present among the women characters, from the same or different races and ethnicities, and that the ruptures of their bonding and controversial actions are a result of the alteration of ethics of care.

## Chapter 1

### Motherhood in Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy*

The African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated- the Law of the Mother.  
(Spillers 479)

Motherhood is a common theme underlying many of Morrison's novels. It is important to consider that the maternal figure in her novels is presented differently from the traditional perspective of submission because mother-daughter bonds can be empowering for women characters. Motherhood receives a major focus in both *Sula* and *A Mercy*, as it shapes the narratives and the characters' lives. The women characters have strong feelings towards their mothers or characters that represent this role, even if their reactions are not always positive.

The mother-daughter relationships are characterized by conflicts between women who are trying to help each other survive in a society that constantly tears them apart mainly because of the constraints imposed by a racist and sexist society. Even though the theme of motherhood is common to many novels by various authors, some narratives tend to ignore the mother and focus on the daughter's experience only. Marianne Hirsch argues that narratives which "focus only on the daughter's perspective and puts the mother in the object position may be colluding with patriarchy" (415). Under patriarchy, women are often defined simply as mothers, and as such they are not viewed as individuals or as powerful agents. With the sole role of caring, the mother's experiences are often silenced for not being relevant. In her novels, Morrison tries to show black mothers' particular experiences

and the characters are not portrayed simply as mothers or only through the perspective of daughters.

Many traditional studies view motherhood through the lenses of a biological imperative that considers women to have a maternal instinct and desire to be mothers. In this chapter, I focus on motherhood as a type of woman bond among characters which is often subject to change according to historical and social circumstances, rather than being inscribed as a biological determinant for the women characters. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich shows how inadequate and harmful labels of mothering and mothers are. Rich states that: “the dominant male culture in separating man as knower from both woman and from nature as the objects of knowledge evolved certain intellectual polarities which still have the power to blind our imaginations” (62). Therefore, it is important to question paradigms which limit the experiences of motherhood.

In “Pathways to Fracture: African American Mothers and the Complexities of Maternal Absence,” Mae Henderson explains how the view of biological determination considers “women’s feelings about pregnancy and motherhood as a manifestation of an instinctive (innate) desire to mother above all else” (30). This idea dangerously equates motherhood with womanhood because it implies that women are only complete as mothers. This perspective tends to idealize motherhood and when applied to the experiences of black women in the context of slavery and its aftermath leads to the erroneous picture of the black mother as completely selfless, or, on the contrary, as astoundingly cruel or even dominant over others.

Davies argues that in the past there has been “a need in black cultures to affirm black motherhood and/or to construct an essentialized mother as a strategic response to racist constructs . . . this affirmation becomes too defining and limiting

for women” (145). Historically, the figure of the black woman has been associated with the “mammy” stereotype, creating the notion of a selfless, biologically determined mother. Although it is important to portray the black mother as powerful, there is a tendency to romanticize black women’s maternal experience. At the same time, negative value is commonly attributed to women who do not have children or deviate from the patterns of conventional mothers. Morrison’s novels break away from these labels that essentialize women’s experiences as mothers.

Even though this chapter focuses on the positive aspects of motherhood, the black mother is not portrayed as healing and selfless and thus escapes any idealization of the women characters. Davies emphasizes the need for reformulating the concept of motherhood giving “greater degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women-defined patterns of mothering, in and out of its biological mandates and social constructs” (142). This concept delimits the discussion of this chapter which proposes to look at mothering through untainted lenses of preconceived notions and stereotypes. In the same way Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy* challenge conventional portrayals of motherhood, this study focuses on destabilizing patterns that classify black women characters as simply mother-like or not mother-like. Furthermore, it is shown that mother-daughter bonds exist beyond biological determinants as many characters come to perform the roles of mothers and daughters. During slavery, black women did not have any guarantees that they would keep their own children and, consequently, traditional forms of attachment and parenting are not possible. In this scenario, daughters and sons are lucky if they can find surrogate mothers to help them grow and understand themselves and the world. Even with the cruelty of slavery, the characters in *A Mercy* are able to construct enriching bonds with non-biologically-related characters. Furthermore, in slavery

and its aftermath, community has a crucial role in helping mothers, as in *Sula*. O'Reilly comments that “mothering expressed itself as both nurturance and word, and care of children was viewed as the duty of the larger community” (5). In this sense, motherhood is not limited to biological mothers as neighbors and friends may often assist and even assume roles of surrogate mothers. In both novels, mother-daughter bonds deeply affect the women characters’ subjectivities as daughters are trying to know their mothers and understand themselves.

Morrison goes beyond the stereotypical image of African American women as impeccable mothers, while at the same time challenging the notion that motherhood deteriorates women because in an African American context it can do just the opposite. Through the bond of motherhood the characters in *Sula* and *A Mercy* are given the opportunity to consider and care about each other and, consequently, about themselves, giving the women characters space to shape their own subjectivities. This analysis focuses on how the novels show mother-daughter bonds as complex interactions, which cannot be analyzed using preconceived stereotypes or essentialist notions.

### 1.1 Motherhood in Slavery and its Aftermath

In the context of *A Mercy* and *Sula*, during and after slavery, the notion of motherhood differs from the conventional characteristics of mothering as it is neither marginalized nor romanticized. This section first focuses on the peculiarities of motherhood in slavery, illustrated by the relationship between Florens and her mother in *A Mercy*. Then, the different types of motherhood in *Sula* are analyzed through a discussion about the Peace and the Wright women.

The novel *A Mercy* takes place in the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the early colonial period of the United States of America. Slavery was then becoming a recurrent business enterprise and, for that reason, any bond among slaves was banished in order to avoid problems and thus increase economic profit and establish a consolidated market. Slave mothers did not have any right over themselves or their children because they were considered mere merchandise. Ironically, as maternal bonds were constantly repressed and forbidden, motherhood became a tool of empowerment for black women. As Foucault states: “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (142). In this sense, power brings within itself the possibility of subversion and as oppression intensifies, it generates a scenario that leads to transgression as seen with many black mothers in slavery. Similarly, hooks states that “marginality [can be seen] as much more than a site of deprivation . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance . . . a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (*Yearning* 150). Thus, black women often find in motherhood the possibility of resisting oppression by loving her child and being loved while trying to ensure their survival, refusing roles of powerless victims.

In *A Mercy*, Florens’s mother experiences the confining contradictions imposed on black mothers and the lack of opportunity and means to immediately explain her actions. Florens and her mother initially belong to D’Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. Jacob goes to D’Ortega’s plantation to receive his payment, but “it became clear what D’Ortega had left to offer. Slaves” (21). D’Ortega insists that Jacob takes a slave as payment, but Jacob is hesitant: “Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity” (22). He does

not like the idea of buying slaves, but near the house, Florens's mother calls his attention: "He saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D'Ortega would refuse, he said, 'Her. That one. I'll take her'" (23-4). Florens's mother is a house slave quite valuable to D'Ortega because he answers: "Ah, no. Impossible. My wife won't allow. She can't live without her" (24). Jacob perceives from his reaction that "there was more than cooking D'Ortega stood to lose" (24). It is implied that Florens's mother is abused by him and, for that reason, she is kept around the house. Although D'Ortega says his wife cannot live without her, it seems that he is the one who does not want to live without her. During the conversation between Jacob and D'Ortega:

The little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes . . . The woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice is barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency. 'Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter. (26)

In an act that surprises Jacob, Florens's mother offers her own daughter to be taken away. Because of this event, Jacob misinterprets Florens's mother's actions, describing her daughter as the: "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away" (34). Like his peers, he shows a distorted view of motherhood that sees black mothers as cruel and detached. This assumption benefits Jacob because it releases him of any guilt for his action of buying a young slave girl and, thus, depriving her of her mother's company. In other words, Florens's mother is judged through the lenses of a white male who fails to understand the reality of black women during slavery. He conveniently portrays Florens's mother as monstrous and convinces himself that

he is doing her a favor by taking her away from this unnatural mother. Jacob convinces himself that the “acquisition [of Florens] . . . could be seen as a rescue” (34), insisting on the fact that he saved Florens from a mother who did not want her.

Later in the novel, however, Florens’s mother has the chance and the means to tell her story and explain her actions and beliefs. This is possible because the last chapter is narrated by her in first person, creating the opportunity for a black mother to have voice to show her perspective. She tells the story from her viewpoint speaking directly to her daughter, explaining to her that “you [Florens] wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor’s eye” (166). Despite Florens’s mother’s attempts to keep her as a child as long as possible, she is worried because D’Ortega already started to notice her daughter. She knows that, if Florens stays, she is doomed to have the same fate as many other women slaves: to be abused and to serve the sexual needs of her white master. She continues to explain her actions: “One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference” (166). Florens’s mother is aware that there are no guarantees for women slaves, but she knows that there are different kinds of oppressions, and she cannot imagine her daughter suffering sexual abuse the way she does. She describes the same scene that Jacob sees but from a totally different perspective:

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes.



It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. (166-67)

Florens's mother sees in Jacob the only chance for Florens to escape from D'Ortega. As a mother, she tries to secure a better future for her daughter - a future with hope that Florens will not have to endure the cruelties she has faced. She is given voice and her cry resonates with those of many black mothers who face the contradictions of mothering under slavery and are often cruelly misjudged.

Differently from most of the characters, Rebekka does not have to suffer the predicaments of enslavement, but she also has a troubling experience of motherhood. She bears many children, but none survive their first years, with the exception of Patrician, who too eventually dies, when she is still a child. Rebekka laments her losses thinking that she: "Had delivered four healthy babies, watched three surrender at a different age to one or another illness, and then watched Patrician, her firstborn, who reached the age of five and provided happiness Rebekka could not believe, lie in her arms for two days before dying from a broken crown" (79). She is, therefore, unable to fulfill her desire to be a mother and suffers greatly from this impossibility. She becomes isolated and after Patrician dies, she distances herself even more from the community and almost stops relating to others outside her farm. The novel then highlights the plights of many mothers – be it of the slave mother who cannot keep her children or the white mother whose children die at an early age. Both Florens's mother and Rebekka are in a certain way denied the possibility of mothering.

In *Sula*, different forms of motherhood delineate the narrative. First, I analyze the Peace family, the three generations of women characters that include Eva, Hannah and Sula. Maternal experiences among the Wright women, Rochelle, Helene, and Nel are then examined. The different experiences of the women

characters show the importance of alternative perspectives to depict black women's reality.

Eva is abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy, when her children are still young. She is left with "\$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her, and she needed money and to get on with her life" (32). She is overwhelmed with emotions but she manages to "postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it" (32). Because she has to concentrate on her children's needs, she becomes practical. Her neighbors are willing to help: "The Suggs, who lived two hundred yards down the road, brought her a warm bowl of peas" (32) and Mrs. Jackson lets her fill a bucket of milk from her cow every morning. The community has a major role in helping the black mother raise her children and, each neighbor contributes with what they can. Even so, Eva does not have a proper way to make ends meet, and she has to endure many difficulties to guarantee her children's and her own survival.

One of Eva's struggles is marked by her various attempts to save Plum when he is just a baby. During the winter, "Plum stopped having bowel movements" (33). Eva tries to massage his stomach, Mrs. Suggs gives her some castor oil, but nothing works. He "cried and fought so they couldn't get much down his throat anyway. He seemed in great pain and his shrieks were pitched high outrage and suffering . . . he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death" (33-4). Plum is desperately in pain and as he is just a baby, he cannot free himself of such misery. Eva cannot stand to see Plum hurting, and "she resolved to end his misery once and for all" (34). Eva:

Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and had shoved the last

bit of food she had in the world . . . up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. (34)

Eva acts out of the necessity to free Plum from his misery and does everything she can to help him. She is successful and he “stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground” (34). This episode is significant as it shows that Eva is ready to take action when her children’s well-being is in play. She is a practical mother who focuses on survival and does not hesitate to do whatever it takes to help her children. When Plum is an adult, she once again acts to free him from further suffering, as will be discussed in chapter three.

Later that night, Plum finally sleeps and the silence allows Eva to once again think about her situation. Although her neighbors are very helpful “Eva felt she would soon run her welcome out; winters were hard and her neighbors were not that much better off” (32). The other families, especially the mothers, empathize with Eva’s hardships as they try to help her as much as possible, but she knows that she cannot depend on them forever because they too have difficulties of their own. As Eva thinks about her possibilities she feels like she does not have a way out because she needs to take care of her kids and at the same time work to earn money. Thus, she decides to act in an unconventional manner to change her condition. After surviving the winter, she asks her neighbor, Mrs. Suggs, to leave her children with her for a day. She only comes back eighteen months later.

When Eva returns to the Bottom, with one leg missing, she “first reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter’s Road . . . which she rented out” (34-5). She comes

back with a missing leg and a large amount of money but she refuses to tell people what happened when she was away. This episode becomes a mystery that pervades the whole story. Although many characters have theories about her missing leg, no one is exactly sure. Similar to many maternal intentions that are not narrated and mothers' actions that are often open to various interpretations in Morrison's novels, Eva's experience of how she lost her leg and got such large amount of money is not revealed.

Henderson mentions that "African American women are many times confined to the dominant discourse's stereotypes as sexually promiscuous, matriarchs and lazy welfare mothers" (32). Morrison challenges this view that classifies black women under binary distinctions by portraying black women mothers as fluid characters, complexly developed, and therefore distant from preordained stereotypes. This is the case of Eva. Although she eventually attains a relative autonomy, builds the house, rents rooms as a source of income, becoming the head of the house hold, she is not reduced to the traditional matriarch figure as other traits also define her, such as her acceptance of her sexuality. Eva is not portrayed as a perfect selfless mother, but as real woman with personal aspirations and desires. Similar to the other Peace women, she "simply loved maleness, for its own sake" (41). This makes her a defiant character because she does not place herself as only a matriarch or mother but assumes her sexuality. Although she loves and cares for her children in her own particular way, she also respects her own needs; even so, she cannot be labeled simply as sexually promiscuous. The narrative voice portrays Eva as a complex character, an independent woman with and personal desires but which do not disqualify her as a good mother.

Hannah, like Eva, is not a conventional selfless mother and she has her own sexual needs which she usually fulfills. Hannah “refused to live without the attentions of a man and after Rekus’ death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors” (42). She has many lovers after Sula’s father, Rekus, passes away, but she has no desire of having another matrimonial relationship with any of the men she gets involved with. As mentioned before, Henderson discusses that black women are often stereotypically portrayed as “sexually promiscuous” (32); however, the Peace women cannot be reduced to such definition that confines black women’s experiences and disseminates more stereotypes. Characters such as Eva and Hannah challenge these boundaries by being mothers and at the same time expressing their sexualities and consequently their individuality. Neither fits the conventional stereotype because, although they love their children, they are not selfless and they first view themselves as women.

In *Sula*, mother-daughter bonds among the Wright women are quite peculiar. Rochelle is Helene’s mother and lives in New Orleans. The two women do not have any contact with each other as Helene is raised by her grandmother because her mother is a prostitute. Nel first meets her grandmother when she accompanies Helene to her great-grandmother’s funeral. As Rochelle and Helene meet: “The two women looked at each other. There was no recognition in the eyes of either” (25). Rochelle continues with her routine as she “moved closer to the mirror and stood there sweeping hair up from her neck back into its halo-like roll, and wetting with spit the ringlets that fell over her ears” (26). She acts as if Helene and Nel are not there, and gets dressed as she normally does. But “[a]ll the while Helene and Nel watched her . . . all to miss seeing her grandmother and seeing instead that painted canary who never said a word of greeting or affection” (26). Rochelle’s attitudes shock Nel

because she expects to find in her a traditional loving grandmother. Likewise, Helene longs for a caring and loving mother – the kind of mother she will never be able to find in Rochelle.

When Nel comments to her mother that Rochelle has soft skin, she answers: “much handled things are always soft” (27) showing Helene’s critical view of her mother. Like Eva and Hannah, Rochelle cannot be described as a stereotypical caring mother. It is not clear if Rochelle refuses or simply cannot change her lifestyle to keep her daughter or how she feels about the situation. Even so, Nel and especially Helene do not cope positively with Rochelle’s alternative conduct. Helene’s and Nel’s inability to acknowledge the differences, experiences and social context creates a gap between them and Rochelle. As I will discuss in the last section of this chapter, the lack of a strong bond between mother and daughter and the fact that Helene wants to distance herself from her mother’s attitudes makes her an overbearing and controlling mother to Nel.

The notions of motherhood in both novels show the importance of abandoning radical assumptions about black mothering. Davies argues that “an essentialized, ‘outraged’ mother as a strategic response to racist constructs... becomes too defining and limiting for women” (145). In *Sula*, Morrison problematizes African American motherhood through characters that do not fit conventional roles, but instead, challenge such definitions by incorporating different aspects and behaviors that challenge simplistic classifications. The discussion of motherhood in *A Mercy* and the description of the different forms of maternal bonds in *Sula* highlight the peculiarities of the experiences of black women during and after slavery.

## 1.2 Mother-Daughter Bonds beyond Biological Determinants

In *Sula* and *A Mercy*, the concept of motherhood is expanded to include more than the traditional biological bonds between mothers and daughters. As common to African American literature, mothers can be represented through grandmothers, friends, and even neighbors. Gloria Joseph argues that “black women play integral parts in the family and frequently it is immaterial whether they are biological mothers, sisters, or members of the extended family” (76). This enlarged family is very common in African American fiction, as the mother figure is sometimes represented by different characters. In *Sula*, for example, the mother figure is often not determined biologically, as is the case with Eva, who comes to be a mother for many characters that live in her pension. Likewise, in *A Mercy*, Lina, a Native American slave, comes to represent a surrogate mother for Florens, a young black slave.

The mother as the main person responsible for the child is actually a notion of modern society as the nuclear family becomes reduced and, the community is separated from the process of mothering. The sense of community for African Americans is important as some mothers “rely on informal kinship and community networks” (Henderson 33) to care of their children temporarily or permanently. For example, when Eva leaves her children with Mrs. Suggs, she knows she can count on her neighbor to take care of them. Eva does not worry about her children being abandoned because she knows she can trust Mrs. Suggs’s solidarity. Surrogate mothers are common in black cultures because many mothers have to endure various hardships and need each other’s support.

Mrs. Suggs, Eva becomes a surrogate mother to many characters that live in her pension. As Patricia Hill Collins mentions “mothering [is] not a privatized

nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men" (45). Eva represents this kind of woman, as she embodies the maternal figure for different characters and is the economic provider of her family. Without a husband, she runs the pension on her own terms. As the narrator describes her home: "Among the tenants in that big house were the children Eva took in" (37). She brings children from the streets to her pension, takes care of them, incorporates these children in the dynamics of the household, educates them and expects them to have appropriate behavior.

When Sula is still a child, Eva finds three children who "came with woolen caps and names given to them by their mothers, grandmothers, or somebody's best friend. Eva snatched the caps off their heads and ignored their names" (37). Although each boy comes from different families and have distinct backgrounds, Eva refuses to see them separately and names each of the three boys "Dewey". Many characters, such as Hannah feel unease about this generalization. She asks her mother: "How is anybody going to tell them apart?" (38). But Eva's point is that there is no difference between them: "What you need to tell them apart for? They's all deweys" (38). This attitude may seem absurd at first as each Dewey is significantly different from the other, but they "accepted Eva's view, becoming in fact as well as in a name a dewey-joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name" (38). Slowly each boy becomes more like the other, until no one can tell them apart and, they finally are simply the Deweys. They respect Eva as their surrogate mother and accept the name she gives them, turning into a unity and forgetting about their separate identities. One might argue that this shows Eva's disregard for the boys individuality; however, this might also illustrate the practical attitude that she has shown



throughout the novel. She has a different way of reasoning the world and her actions reflect her individuality.

Eva is the breadwinner of the family and at the same time she tells children stories, creating a fertile space for them to dream and explore the world around them. She cares not only for her biological children's well being but for all of her extended family, worrying about everyone in her household. She is usually aware of what happens in her pension and gives advice with the best intentions. She "fussed interminable with the brides of the newly wed couples for not getting their men's supper ready on time, about how to launder shirts, press them, etc" (42). Eva tries to teach the young women to behave properly by showing them how to take care of their husbands and themselves. After Sula is older, she calls Eva "Big Mamma" (92). Sula's remark is a reference to Eva's vast experience as a mother to various characters in the narrative.

In *A Mercy*, Lina becomes a surrogate mother for Florens, as both long to care and be cared for. It is important to consider the social context of slavery that Lina and Florens find themselves entrapped in. Both are separated from their families at a very early age. Florens is sold and, is thus, separated from her mother while still a child and longs for a mother figure. Lina is one of the few survivors of a plague that attacked her village and wants to belong to a community and have a family. Lina's adoption of the role of the traditional mother and caregiver can be attributed to the loss of her family and the time she spends in the Presbyterian community. Although Lina manages to survive by herself, she desires to have family connections as she used to have. She sees in Florens the opportunity to give the care she never received and create a family tie with the young girl. This need is exacerbated because in the Presbyterian community, in which she lived after she lost her family, Lina is

marginalized and treated poorly; she yearns for a family and for love. However, she feels that to care for Florens means that she has to protect and prevent her from making mistakes, which proves to be impossible, as later discussed in this section.

As soon as Florens arrives in Jacob's plantation, Lina is absorbed with feelings of care as she: "had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow" (60). Florens mentions that "Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth" (8), showing that both understand and sympathize with each other. They slowly become more involved with one another: "they had memorable nights, lying tighter, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories" (61) and their relationship is gradually strengthened. Florens feels safe in her arm and "would sigh then, her head on Lina's shoulder and when sleep came the little girl's smile lingered" (63). Lina comforts her and they begin to love and trust each other. Florens likes to hear stories, but the ones she loves most are always those about maternal bonds: "Especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters" (61). She admires protective mothers who struggle to ensure the survival of their children and keep them close. She longs for the same kind of bond, because she erroneously believes her mother did not care for her. In fact, this mistaken perception will deeply affect Florens's life, as we shall discuss later.

Although Lina is not Florens's biological mother, or any relative of hers, she becomes a surrogate mother. O'Reilly discusses a pattern in Morrison's novels in which "[o]ther women, while not mothers themselves, are ship and safe harbor to children through the practice of othermothering" (41). O'Reilly defines othermother as a close woman friend who "heals the woman by prompting her to take a journey of re-memory and reconnection . . . With the spirit of the lost mother" (41). Not

limited to relatives, othermothers help women cope with the loss of their biological mothers, which as we saw, is a common pattern in slavery. Collins also adopts the term othermothers to widely refer to women bonds among black women that help them survive and shape their subjectivities. This thesis employs the term othermothers to refer specifically to the surrogate mother but is not limited to black women, as Lina is to Florens.

While on her errand to get the blacksmith to save Rebekka, Florens longs for Lina's guidance: "I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness" (42). As her othermother, Lina represents the wisdom and knowledge that Florens needs. While alone, Florens remembers her good times with her and misses "sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina" (6). Like a daughter who carefully listens to her mother's advice, Florens makes constant reference to Lina's teachings as she runs her errand: "Lina says . . . not all natives are like her . . . so watch out" (5). She tries to remember things that she learned so she will be able to survive and not be harmed. They perform the roles of mother and daughter, and it can be argued that "the concept of motherhood cannot be reduced to a biological function" (Joseph 83), especially in a slave holding society in which bearing children did not mean that the black mother had any say in the fate of her child.

Lina and Florens become each other's family and are quite intimate, not experiencing the distance that sometimes separates African American mothers and daughters. Lina openly shares with Florens how much she has suffered at the hands of men and the white community: "he uses the flat of his hand when he has anger . . . She tells me how it is to walk town lanes wiping blood from her nose . . . The Presbyterians stare at her face and the blood wipes on her clothes but say nothing" (104-5). This quote illustrates how much Lina suffered and how she longs for

Florens's future to be different. In contrast to African American mothers who try to make their daughters strong enough to endure different hardships, Lina tries to help Florens by protecting her. This attempt is fruitless as she cannot control Florens or the events that happen. She tries to prevent Florens from getting involved with the blacksmith by telling her stories and doing everything possible to keep her away from him. Eventually, however, Lina is not able to stop their relationship. Even being a persistent mother, she cannot save Florens or protect her. During the blacksmith's stay at Jacob's farm, he and Florens become romantically involved, and she falls desperately in love with him. As Lina foresees and despite her warnings, her obsessive love for the blacksmith leads to her destruction in the end.

Florens and Lina are in need of love and care as they are trying to survive in a world that has dilacerated bonds with families and loved ones. The narrator states that "the mother hunger – to be one or have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone" (63). This quote illustrates how both feel the need to have a mother-daughter bond and how they complement each other. By cultivating mutual feelings of love and respect, both women compensate their previous traumas of abandonment and loss and, through their mother and daughter bond, they feel loved and cared for.

### 1.3 Mother-Daughter Bonds and Subjectivity

As discussed above, both in *Sula* and *A Mercy*, the characters are largely influenced by mother-daughter bonds. As Diane Gillespie and Missy Kubitscheck observe, it is important to perceive the connection between different factors or the "web-like nature of women's social relationships" (29). This means that maternal ties are a complex type of bond among women. This bond can shape the characters

subjectivities in various ways, being influenced by outside and intrinsic factors, such as the environment, the community, as well as the character's personality and actions.

Mother-daughter bonds shape the women characters' multiple subjectivities, especially the daughters, who tend to define themselves either in similar ways or in opposition to their mothers. Mothers affect their daughter's sense of selves even if unconsciously. While discussing mother-daughter relations, Alice Walker states: "I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated. . . guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength - in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (409). In this quote, the secret Walker is searching for she finds in her mother's garden and, by finding it she is able to also find her own garden. In other words, she can only understand herself through her mother, who is a symbol of her roots, affecting her personality, strength and beliefs. She can only understand herself after she understands her mother. It is almost as if black women learn from their mothers an inner courage to survive in a sexist and racist society without losing their funk. O'Reilly argues that "the term funk signals traditional black values" (24), symbolizing the keeping of one's heritage. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) there is a reference to funk as "the funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of a wide range of emotions" (68). In this context, funk can be defined as an overall characteristic of black culture many times passed on through mother figures.

O'Reilly argues that black women's authentic sense of self is "made possible through preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing of motherwork" (40). Although I do not adopt a notion of an authentic or real sense of self, because each character is seen as plural and with multiple subjectivities, O'Reilly's arguments help

to highlight how motherhood is important for African Americans. Motherhood and community are seen as vital for black women's subjectivities because they are sources of empowerment, in which love for oneself is established through the care of others. Women bonds of motherhood are important because "self-love depends on the self first being loved by another self" (O'Reilly 33). The women characters' subjectivities are shaped through their experiences with their mothers and maternal figures are crucial for daughters to first feel loved and then to learn to give love. This section first focuses on how motherhood affects the development of the women characters' sense of selves in *Sula* through the characters of Sula and Nel and their relationships with their mothers. Then I discuss the mother-daughter bonds in *A Mercy* and how they shape the women characters' subjectivities.

At an early age, Sula sees that her mother has different men around the house. One day "Sula came home from school and found her mother in the bed, curled spoon in the arms of a man. Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44). Hannah does not hide her involvement with men and she is not embarrassed by her sexuality or sexual practices. Sula is influenced by her behavior and when she becomes an adult, Sula herself takes on many lovers. As she observes her mother's attitudes, she imitates it and does not look for long attachments with the men she gets involved with, trying instead only to fulfill her curiosity and sexual desires. Hannah's actions can be associated with Eva, who after BoyBoy leaves does not want another husband, but still likes the company of different men.

Sula's difficulty in being attached to others is also influenced by what she wrongly perceives as a lack of her mother's love because of what she listens to as a

child. One afternoon, Sula hears Hannah say to her friends: “You love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (57). Sula interprets Hannah’s words as a lack of love and care towards her. This episode marks Sula’s behavior as an adult as it “taught her there was no other that you could count on” (118-19). She is thus determined not to rely on or love anybody because, in her opinion, not even her mother likes or cares for her. After this episode, Sula is lost as she feels she “had no center, no speck around which to grow” (119). She is described as:

Distinctly different. Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life. (118)

Sula incorporates different aspects from Eva’s and Hannah’s personalities and she mixes their qualities to create her own subjectivity, as a free and careless woman. She is determined to search for whatever amuses her without worrying about other people. As Sula is traumatized by what she perceives as her mother’s indifference, she mistakenly believes that alone she will be independent and strong because no one will be close enough to harm her. In addition, Sula is negatively influenced by her and Nel’s accident with Chicken Little, a young boy who lived in the Bottom. The three of them are playing together and “Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around” (60). Unfortunately, he slips from Sula’s hand and falls into the bank of the river: “the water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank . . . They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls started” (61). Nel and Sula are paralyzed and do not save him. They are

confused and do not understand their own reactions. No one in the community finds out what happens, except for Shadrack, who the girls suspect could have seen them but does not say anything. Sula does not forget this episode and the narrator states that “one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle” (118). This suggests that Sula no longer sees herself as being responsible for her acts and does not bother to take on her responsibilities or assume any guilt for her actions.

When Sula returns to the Bottom after college, she has a meaningful conversation with Eva, in which both speak their mind. Sula shows her frustrations and reasons for choosing her free way of life. When Eva asks: “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you” (92) Sula promptly answers: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Eva worries about Sula’s response because for her family is extremely important, because it can help define black women’s subjectivities and be an empowering tool for women. But as Sula is deeply marked by her mother’s words, she is determined to be detached from anyone who may also hurt her feelings. She believes she can only be happy by concentrating on herself and not worrying about a family, and especially about children. Eva believes that she is misinterpreting what motherhood can mean for women. While referring to the importance of motherhood, Eva tells Sula: “It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need . . . I’m a tell you what you need” (92). Eva is once again practical and tries to show her granddaughter the importance of family, but Sula does not let her continue. Sula sees herself as performing a transgressive role by refusing to be defined according to what she represents for someone else or as a mother. She is trying to forget her past and disconnect from others because she feels she was rejected as a daughter.



Sula thinks that, by ignoring a maternal role, she is her own definer, but she forgets that she is already shaped by her mother and grandmother, even if unconsciously. She fails to perceive that motherhood can offer her the empowerment she longs for. Eva calls Sula “Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (92). Although Eva’s words focus on the figure of a man, in fact, she tries to show the importance of family bonds and not necessarily the figure of a man as the family provider. Sula interprets her comments literally and answers: “You did... Mamma did” (92). Eva then responds to Sula’s comments by saying: “Not by choice” (92). Sula fails to fully understand Hannah and Eva because, although Sula remembers them being alone as providers for the family, without husbands, they give importance to family, their values and motherhood, even if they have a different way of showing it. In addition, both Eva and Hannah did once love and have a stable relationship. Eva was married to BoyBoy and she moved from her old town to accompany him to the Medallion. They had children and lived together until BoyBoy left one day. Hannah, in turn, was married to Rekus, Sula’s father, but he dies when Sula is still a child and Hannah moves to her mother’s pension.

Sula does not think about the context of Eva’s and Hannah’s lives and refuses to have any connections with motherhood. Furthermore, through Sula’s dialogue with Eva, it can be observed that she in fact wants to have the freedom of coming and going as men do, so she feels the need to reject any connection with her maternal side, which could be seen as docile or submissive. Hirsch mentions that “she reinforces another irreconcilable dichotomy – that of mother and artist” (424). Sula is entrapped in the confining opposition that represents women strictly as care takers and dependent or as rebels and independent. She mistakenly believes that in order for her to be free she cannot have any maternal ties.

It may be argued that mother-daughter bonds influence the Wright women's subjectivities in different ways. Helene's grandmother takes her "away from the soft lights and flowered carpets of the Sundown House and raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary" (17). She is raised by her grandmother and from a very early age she is advised to be "constantly on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood" (17). Helene is taught to behave properly and to repress any resemblance to her mother Rochelle. As she is embarrassed by her mother's way of life, she desperately wants to move and knows that "her grandmother's middle-aged nephew who lived in a Northern town called Medallion was the one chance she had" (17). Trying to flee from her past, Helene marries Wiley Wright and moves to the Bottom.

Helene tries to clearly distance herself from Rochelle and forces Nel to do the same. While traveling to New Orleans, she answers her mother in a meaningful way: "I don't talk Creole.' She gazed at her daughter's wet buttocks. 'And neither do you [Nel]'" (27). Helene refuses to have any contact with her mother and wants to make sure that Nel will establish no connection with her grandmother. She becomes precisely the opposite of Rochelle. As a consequence of her mother's obsessive behavior, Nel is negatively affected as she becomes an insecure and lonely child. Nevertheless, neither Rochelle nor Helene is judged as a bad mother. They represent the complexities of the different experiences of the black mother and how they deal with the many difficulties they have to withstand.

Helene's attitudes are a response to her rejection of Rochelle. In contrast to her mother, she is determined to be a present mother for Nel and she tries to control her and to run a perfect household. For Helene, "[h]er daughter was more comfort and purpose than she ever hoped to find in this life" (17). She is a dedicated mother,

taking care of her daughter and performing the conventional role of a good mother and wife. Choosing the opposite path in relation to her mother, she participates in the “most conservative black church. And held sway” (18). She tries to be a model of a devoted mother and impeccable wife so no would doubt her worth. The narrator emphasizes that Helene “loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband” (18). She becomes a controlling mother by demanding order in the house and carefully supervising Nel.

Helene does not allow her daughter to be herself as “[a]ny enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother” (18). She is determined to obfuscate any outbursts from her daughter because she is afraid of any similarity in behavior that Nel may have with her grandmother. She is very strict about controlling Nel’s behavior and wants her to fit the role of a traditional and proper young girl, preferably one who behaves like a white girl. Helene talks to her daughter about changing the shape of her nose: ““while you sittin’ there, honey, go ‘head and pull your nose.’ ‘It hurts, Mama.’ ‘Don’t you want a nice nose when you grow up?’” (55). Helene gives Nel a clothespin to make her nose thinner in an effort to change her daughter’s appearance. Against her will, Nel obeys her mother although she does not agree with her, but and as an adult, she adheres to Helene’s conventional behavior and attitudes. She marries Jude, has children, runs the household and fills her time with charity work for the church, like her mother. Like Helene, Nel is compelled to live according to the expectations of the other members of the Bottom community.

Although Helene manages to leave New Orleans, has a traditional marriage and behaves in a socially accepted manner, she cannot distance herself completely from her mother’s behavior. During Helene’s and Nel’s trip to New Orleans, she is confronted by the conductor. Despite his rude remarks telling her she is in the wrong

cabin, Helene obeys, apologizes and answers with a smile like “a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before” (21). The image suggests that Helene is eager to please the conductor who disrespects her. A short while later, Nel looks at her mother’s dress and sees that the “hooks and eyes in the placket of the dress had come undone and exposed the custard-colored skin underneath” (22). She notices that her mother tried to call attention to her body when she was talking to the man. Helene uses her beauty and sexuality to talk to the conductor as she apparently obeys his seating rules.

Therefore, even though Helene is successful in trying to adopt a traditional role of good wife and mother, she is still influenced by her mother’s attitudes towards men. Reproducing her mother’s attitudes, when she is caught off guard and needs to get out of a certain situation, she equally resorts to her sexuality to seduce men. This episode problematizes Helene’s rejection of her mother, because depending on the circumstances, she acts like Rochelle. Like her mother, Helene falls back on her beauty and uses it as a way to overcome difficult situations, judging her mother too severely and ignoring her actions.

Nel is shocked by Helene’s use of her sexuality. Witnessing this event, Nel “wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marble flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (22). She wants to be a strong woman and not become an object of desire, regardless of the situation and circumstances. Although Nel is apparently successful in not depending on her sexuality, as an adult, she becomes conservative and strict just like her mother. Like Helene, who wants to define herself in opposition to Rochelle, Nel also wants to distance herself from her mother, but both Helene and Nel have more in common with their mothers than they suspect.

Mother-daughter bonds are paradoxical as daughters often try to rebel against their mother's attitudes, many times because they do not understand the specific context. However, daughters eventually find themselves in similar situations. Inevitably, daughters are influenced by their interactions (or lack of them) with their mothers. If daughters do not make peace with their mothers and try to understand their cultural bearing and experiences, they run the risk of alienating themselves from their family and consequently cannot develop positive subjectivities. Helene and Hannah severely judge their mothers, in the same way that Sula and Nel do. Daughters often expect conventional attitudes from their mothers and forget to consider the historical, economic, cultural and social aspects that affect mothering. Sula, Nel, Helene, Hannah show their incapacity to "transcend the fate of their mothers, as well as their inability to repeat it" (Hirsch 426). Each woman desires to shape her subjectivity in opposition to her mother figure, because there is a lack of understanding among daughters and mothers. Despite this disconnection from their mothers, they still tend to behave similarly. Moreover, the daughters' misinterpretation of their mothers' actions and the inability of mothers and daughters to communicate have negative impact on the lives of the daughters because they have erroneous assumptions about their mothers' attitudes.

Likewise, in *A Mercy*, motherhood also affects the women characters' subjectivities. Florens shapes her subjectivities according to Lina, her surrogate mother. As mentioned before, Lina becomes Florens's othermother, and as such she influences Florens's subjectivity and how she sees of herself and the world: "Lina says from the state of my teeth I am maybe seven or eight . . . Lina says Sir has a clever way of getting without giving" (5). In this passage, Florens trusts whatever Lina tells her and she comes to view Jacob through Lina's perspective. Lina tries to

teach her to be alert and, Florens, in turn, tries to shape herself to please Lina and make her proud. Florens's understanding of herself is based on Lina's views: "Lina says my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires" (4). By commenting on her feet, she is making a reference to Florens's personality because Lina believes that Florens is too sentimental and soft, when she needs to be cautious and strong. In fact, Florens is sensitive and does not block out her emotions and, that can be dangerous for a woman slave. Only in the end does Florens acquire the strength both Lina and her mother want her to have. Using the same metaphor of the feet, she concludes: "Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (161). By the end of the novel, Florens has suffered too much and is no longer the sweet little girl.

As discussed before, Florens is also influenced by the memory of her biological mother. Although she is separated from her birth mother when she was only a child, she constantly thinks about her mother and the fact that she was forced to leave her. Even with Florens's identification with Lina as her surrogate mother, she still has trouble to positively shape her subjectivity. In the beginning of the novel, in her first writings, Florens tries to explain her story but assumes there are various things she does not comprehend: "Too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much" (4). She knows she does not understand the situation clearly, but she cannot imagine what she is leaving out. She has unresolved feelings towards her mother's actions and is greatly affected by being offered to Jacob to take her away. When Florens refers to her brother she says: "Mother, me, her little boy . . . her baby boy on her hip" (7). She clearly and constantly remembers her brother on her mother's lap, showing how

she is jealous of the boy who stays with their mother. She sees her mother as protective only of him, he is “her little boy,” “her baby boy”. Florens, however, is only a child and does not comprehend her mother’s perspectives and reality. She holds to the memory of her mother keeping her little brother and offering her to Jacob.

At Jacob’s farm, Florens is constantly trying to please other people, as she is scared they are going to abandon her in the same way she believes her mother did. Rebekka is “amused by Florens’ eagerness for approval: ‘Well done.’ ‘It’s fine.’ However slight, any kindness shown her, she munched like a rabbit” (96). As Florens lacks self-confidence because of her past, she is happy with any kind of encouragement and she wants to be helpful and important. She feels like she does not belong anywhere as she ponders to herself: “Lina says there are some spirits who look after warriors and hunters and there are others who guard virgins and mothers. I am none of those” (68). Lina’s comments are a reflection of the notions she has learned, but her reality and Florens’s do not fit those learned concepts. Neither has the opportunity to become warriors or hunters, because they are women, destitute and abandoned orphans. As slaves, they cannot assume traditional roles assigned to women because they are merchandise, and do not control their lives, much less their bodies. In this sense, Florens worries because she does not fit any of those categories, concluding that she is alone with no spirits or forces to look after her. This episode illustrates the displacement young black women undergo during slavery as they try to shape their own subjectivities.

In this novel, *Sorrow*, a young black slave, has trouble coping with her experiences, but through motherhood she is able to define her own sense of self. She is the only survivor of a slave ship, and left alone, she invents Twin, an imaginary

and loyal friend. They do everything together: “Both skinned down the broken mast and started walking a rocky shoreline” (117). Twin becomes her only friend and a consolation for being alone and completely lost. Sorrow is found by the Sawyers and she remembers that she “woke up naked under a blanket, with a warm wet cloth on her forehead . . . A woman with white hair was watching her” (117). She tries to speak, but Twin “whispered NO, so she shrugged her shoulders and found that a convenient gesture for the other information” (118). She refuses to say more than a couple of words and “the housewife named her” (119) Sorrow. She stops talking and does not care to interact with others ever since. Even after Jacob buys her, she only talks with Twin and constantly wanders off alone, away from everybody.

Sorrow is abused several times by various men. She is not even aware that what happens is a different form of domination, because for her she has experienced these abuses as long as she can remember and simply associates them to other forms of oppressions she suffers as a woman slave. During her stay at the Sawyers, there are various passages that suggest that Sorrow is sexually abused. She says that “on occasion she had secret company other than Twin, but not better than Twin” (119). It seems that the Sawyers’ boys were secretly abusing her. Further evidence is given when Sorrow first gets her period and the “housewife told her it was monthly blood; that all females suffered it and she believed her until the next month and the next and the next when it did not return” (119). This passage indicates not only that Sorrow is abused but that she is pregnant. She then talks to Twin, “about whether it [her pain] was instead the result of the goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending . . . Because the pain was outside between her legs, not inside where the housewife said” (119-20). She tries to understand what is happening to her body but she lacks a mother figure to talk with about her body, the abuses and its



consequences. She has no idea she might be pregnant and that she is hurting because she is constantly violated.

Later, in Jacob's farm, although it is not explicit in the novel, there are various references that suggest Jacob too abuses Sorrow. For example, Sorrow gets to sleep inside, but Lina does not envy this benefit. Besides, Lina knows that "[n]o good could come of leaving Mistress alone with Sorrow, and now that her stomach was low with child, she was even less reliable" (55). As Sorrow is pregnant, there is a certain tension between Rebekka and her. The suspicions around who is the father increases. Lina believes that Sorrow is pregnant with Jacob's baby. However, it is not clear if that is true because only Lina mentions about the baby's father. Further evidence is that she is abused throughout the narrative and, she is privileged in the farm as Jacob tells her to sleep inside the house, implying that he follows the same pattern of other men. Even so, the possibility that Sorrow gets involved with a different man cannot be completely disregarded as it is only suggested that Jacob abuses her.

Regardless of the situation, Sorrow is determined to have her baby. She "took a knife and a blanket to the riverbank the moment the first pain hit" (132). Alone, she is "screeching when she had to, sleeping in between, until the next brute tear of body and breath" (132). She is convinced that despite the pain she will have her baby and she hopes that Willard and Scully, men who help out at the farm, will appear to help her. They eventually see Sorrow and "[k]neeling in water as Sorrow pushed, they pulled, eased and turned the tiny form stuck between her legs" (132). They are successful and Sorrow has a baby girl. Afterwards, she is "prompted by the legitimacy of her new status as a mother" (133) and is proud of having a child.

While discussing Morrison's novels in general, O'Reilly argues that motherhood is a site of empowerment for black women (1) which explains why Sorrow feels stronger by becoming a mother. After she has her baby she starts "attending routine duties, organizing them around her infant's needs" (134). She takes care of her baby, does her chores, and she interacts with others as she did not used to do before her baby was born. Her imaginary friend, Twin, disappears as Sorrow no longer needs to imagine a close bond with a friend because she now has a real and strong connection with her daughter. She starts to talk to Lina, Florens and Rebekka and she becomes "bold enough to remark to her Mistress, 'It was good that the blacksmith came to help when you were dying'" (133). Sorrow's process of discovering her own self and her confidence grows with her baby girl and she is finally able to speak for herself.

Sorrow gives a positive connotation to motherhood, one that empowers her and allows her to care for her baby and consequently for herself. She then names herself "'I am your mother' she said. 'My name is Complete'" (134). This episode illustrates how she feels complete, fully identified in her role as a mother. It also shows the importance of both the role of motherhood and of self-naming. A parallel can be made with Hudson-Weems's arguments in defense of Africana Womanism: "proper self-naming and self-defining, as a means of establishing clarity, will at the same time offer the first steps towards correcting confusion and misconception regarding one's true identity" (20). Hudson-Weems's arguments are relevant as they contribute to the belief that the act of naming demonstrates who is in control and what perspective is adopted. As Sorrow feels strong, she no longer wants to be defined by others, she does not want the negative name given to her (Sorrow), and so creates her own name, which mirrors her blissful state of mind. Sorrow names herself

to acquire control over her life and her newborn baby. In a time when any bonding is dangerous and many times harmful, Sorrow is able to positively shape her subjectivity through motherhood.

Thus, in both novels, mother-daughter bonds greatly affect the women characters' subjectivity. Daughters are especially influenced by their interactions or lack of interactions with their biological and surrogate mothers, as illustrated through the discussion of the characters Sula, Helene, Nel and Florens. Also, motherhood may create an opportunity for the characters to become more confident and strong, as is the case with Sorrow.

This chapter illustrates the complexity of motherhood, in *Sula* and *A Mercy*, because Morrison does not create a fairy tale or an idealized story about mother-daughter bonds. The various realities of the women characters show the heterogeneous experiences of motherhood under slavery and in a post slavery society. As discussed, mother-daughter bonds are not limited to biological connections as many women come to play the roles of mothers and daughters. Women bonds also shape the characters' subjectivity and can often help the women characters attempt to define themselves. Motherhood in *Sula* and *A Mercy* is portrayed through different perspectives, reflecting the many possible manifestations of mother-daughter bonds during slavery and in its aftermath.

## Chapter 2: Sisterhood in *Sula* and *A Mercy*

There is movement in the shadow  
of a sun that is old now. There, just there.  
Coming from the rim of the world. A  
disturbing disturbance that is not a hawk  
nor stormy weather, but a dark woman, of  
all things. My sister, my me- rustling, like  
life.

(Morrison, *A knowing So Deep* 33)

Now imagine if you will  
The essence and thrill

As you stand feeling proud  
In the heart of this crowd

Sisterhood of modern Sojourners today  
Still out in front blazing the way.

A room full of sisters, like jewels in a  
crown  
Vanilla, cinnamon, and dark chocolate  
brown

(Jones, "A Room Full of Sisters," qtd. In  
Hudson-Weems 76)

While discussing the conventional role of women characters in various novels of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Abel argues that in the "traditional novelistic use of female friendship . . . the protagonist's relation to her friends is less significant than the rather schematic options these friends often represent" (414). Contrary to this tradition, that focuses on one protagonist, Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy* emphasize the interactions among women friends "rather than the static function of emblematic secondary characters" (Abel 414). In *Sula*, both Nel and Sula have the leading role and in *A Mercy*, although Florens is the narrator of some chapters, Lina,

Sorrow, and Rebekka are also complexly developed and have an important role in the narrative.

In “The (US)es of (I)dentify,” Judith Gardiner discusses friendship in Morrison’s *Sula* and in Ruth Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* (1975) that women bonds are based on commonality and complementarity. In this chapter, I make a comparison between *Sula* and *A Mercy*, following Gardiner’s interconnecting terms. In these novels, sisterhood acquires complex forms, moving beyond binary distinctions. I view sisterhood as a type of bond that allows the women characters to create an alliance to assist each other. Similarly, Hudson-Weems defines sisterhood as “a reciprocal [bond] . . . in which each gives and receives equally . . . demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other . . . They are joined emotionally” (65). However, it may be argued that in both novels, sisterhood is not idealized, but rather problematized. Although the term sisterhood is adopted to describe friendship bonds between the women characters, there is no singular or universal type of sisterhood. Each bond is treated as context specific.

This chapter first focuses on the peculiarities of sisterhood in *Sula* through the friendship of Sula and Nel. As mentioned before, their sisterhood is very intense and intimate. They are both young black girls growing up in the 1960’s and they become best friends. Their sisterhood is so strong that it significantly affects each other’s subjectivities and it helps them struggle for empowerment. It is worth mentioning that in *Sula*, there are brief remarks about women bonds among other characters, as for example between Eva and Mrs. Suggs, and among Hannah, Patsy and Valentine. However, their bonding is not examined because there are only brief references to these characters. Mrs. Suggs is mentioned as the neighbor who helps Eva and with whom Eva trusts to leave her kids with when she leaves to find work. The bonding

between Eva and her is not fully described in the novel and therefore not analyzed in this chapter. Although Mrs. Suggs has an important role in the novel, as a temporary surrogate mother to Hannah and Plum, her bond with Eva's children and with Eva herself is not described. Similarly, Patsy and Valentine, Hannah's friends, are portrayed when the three are briefly sharing their experiences. Their conversation is not long, and the bonding among these women is not fully depicted. In this sense, it may be argued that the sisterhood bonding that is closely developed in *Sula* is that between Nel and Sula, justifying the focus of this chapter on the bonding between the two.

Next, this chapter considers the peculiarities of sisterhood in *A Mercy*, illustrated by Rebekka and the friends she makes on her journey to the New World. Although their bonding is temporary, their union gives them support and strength to help them assert their own worth. Rebekka is a white European immigrant who leaves London to marry Jacob. She belongs to a lower class and her parents are happy to send her to marry him and receive a dowry. On Rebekka's journey she interacts with the other women on the ship. Through sisterhood they create a pleasant environment as they come together and share their experiences. Their bonding is brief, and even if they are not best friends, their union is, nevertheless, important for each of them.

When Rebekka arrives in Jacob's farm, she meets Lina, and eventually they become friends. Their sisterhood is based on their need for survival in the wilderness, as their dependence on each other dissolves many of their differences. Also, in *A Mercy*, while Florens is on her errand, she is helped by Jane, a white girl. Through sisterhood, Florens and Jane are able to identify with each other's struggles and their alliance, although temporary, has many implications. The bonding between Florens

and Jane, and Lina and Rebekka suggests that even in slavery there is a possibility for women to come together as they try to withstand their hardships. Therefore, I suggest in this chapter that sisterhood is possible among women from different races and ethnicities, as present in *A Mercy*.

## 2.1 Sisterhood, Subjectivity and Empowerment in *Sula*

In *Sula* the women characters' subjectivities are constantly changing due to multiple factors. It is important to note that the "the nature of identity itself is problematic. The self in *Sula* is equally open to fragmentation or expansion" (Abel 426). In this sense, the characters do not have a static identity, but rather they have flexible subjectivities. Sisterhood is one of the factors that shape the women characters' lives and their sense of selves. This section focuses specifically on the bond of sisterhood between Nel and Sula as each is affected differently by their bonding. I initially present a theoretical discussion about the topic in question, followed by a close analysis of the novel, showing how the friendship between Sula and Nel allows them to redefine their subjectivities and struggle for empowerment.

Sisterhood often centers upon the "lives and experiences of Black women, a kind of 'selfishness' necessitated by the social imperative for Black women to be selfless" (Quashie 188). This kind of selfishness allows the women to find their own worth because the "identification that generates from this love is powerful and self-reflexive, though not narcissistic" (Quashie 196). Thus, sisterhood helps women become aware of their personal needs because they find the space to look inward and focus on themselves while caring for the other.

When the bonding is intense, women may seem to dissolve into each other, being so close that they become interconnected. As Abel explains the "reasons for

this psychic fusion initially derive from the nature of intimate relationships” (422). Women bonds allow women to develop a kind of volatile self as they experiment with each other and consequently with themselves. Through strong sisterhood, women may become so close that, as Kevin Quashie argues, “the girlfriend, the other . . . is so much the self that the boundaries between the two become fluid and sometimes collapse” (192). Central to black women’s plight is the “phenomenal dialectic between self and other, the oscillation that becomes a process of black woman-centered identification” (Quashie 197). In this sense, sisterhood provides women, especially black women, with the means to experiment with themselves as they discover each other. Women’s intimate and fluid connection helps them see their own beauty and their importance, because they are able to envisage themselves in the other and, thus they are able to see their worth. Sisterhood creates the possibility for black women to develop their own subjectivities by aligning themselves with girlfriends.

The discussion of Morrison’s *Sula* illustrates the intense sisterhood bonding through the characters of Nel and Sula. In the novel, sisterhood offers a “rare opportunity for that black woman to be selfish” (Quashie 190). It is very common for the black woman to worry about others and neglect her own needs, but through sisterhood, black women characters, such as Nel and Sula have the chance to think about themselves by acting according to their own necessities. This selfishness contributes in different ways to the growth of the girls as they are able to care and think about themselves, by thinking about each other. Both love each other and consequently are able to love themselves as they see in the other their own image.

Nel and Sula are so intimate that the distinction between “one” and the “other” becomes blurred. They are both young black girls at the age of twelve living



in different households in the Bottom community. For them “a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other” (83). Both girls take offenses and admiration as if they were a single being, and not separate individuals. The narrator depicts their deep bond through vivid imagery as when both girls are digging holes in the ground “until the two holes were one and the same” (58). They work together until the hole become one or an inseparable unit, showing metaphorically how they are interconnected. Like two holes becoming one, their sisterhood is so intense that they are connected to the point that they become a part of each other. They reflect each other’s beliefs and with a glimpse know what the other is thinking. In fact, the girls become so much alike that it can be difficult to tell them apart: “they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (83). Not only did they act like each other, but they also entered each other’s thoughts. Even if only figuratively, they become part of each other’s consciousness and innermost feelings. Sula recalls that “they were two throats and one eye and we had no price” (147). This imagery shows that although they have two bodies, or two mouths to absorb the outside world, they have only one eye, or one way to view and perceive the things as they are united in thought and worldview.

Smith points out the “pricelessness they achieve in refusing to sell themselves for male approval, the total worth that they can only find in each other’s eyes” (422). As young girls and best friends they seek approval of only one another. As the narrator states it: “In the safe harbor of each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things” (55). Each girl is a source of comfort for the other and through sisterhood they care for each other. Together both girls feel at ease and free to explore whatever calls their attention.

In this sense, sisterhood creates a positive interconnectedness between Sula and Nel, as the girls have the liberty to come together to create alternative subjectivities for themselves. They seem to devise another dimension in which they are able to freely interact with each other's sense of selves. Both girls "discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" (52). Therefore, they "had set about creating something else to be" (52) as both come to rediscover themselves as two young black girls living in the Bottom community in the 1960's. Through their friendship, they identify with each other's struggle and unite. Although they have different experiences from growing up in two completely different households, they transcend their differences and become an extension of the other, while at the same time shaping their own subjectivities. Sisterhood brings them together but helps them in different ways.

With Sula, Nel becomes more confident and is able to redefine her subjectivity more positively by accepting and loving herself, refusing the role her mother insists that she should adopt. The narrator emphasizes Nel's submission by saying that "her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" (83). She is raised under strict rules and she has neither liberty nor space to be spontaneous. The only exception is "an occasional leadership role with Sula . . . Only with Sula did that quality have free reign" (83). This comment made by the impersonal narrator shows sisterhood helps Nel become more empowered.

As previously mentioned, Nel's mother is determined to correct her wide nose and constantly tells her daughter to "pull her nose" (55), hoping it would set it straight and thus rid her of this particular black trait. It is only after Nel meets Sula that she begins to like her nose and let her black appearance show by defying her mother's desire of reshaping it. She then stops using the clothespin: "After she met

Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed” (55). Nel’s friendship with Sula makes her stronger and she is able to go against her mother’s rules. Nel starts to like her appearance and accept who she is as her “friendship is free from the compulsions that restrict or disregard the self” (Abel 428). Sisterhood allows Nel to express herself and accept the beauty of her appearance as a black woman. Similarly, she questions the necessity of having straight hair. Although Nel is able to hide the clothespin, her mother continues to straighten her hair: “there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening” (55). Even so, now she is not worried about changing her hair because the consequences of the hot comb or the “smooth hair - no longer interested her” (55). After getting to know Sula, Nel discovers herself as a naturally beautiful girl and does not desire to change her physical characteristics.

For Sula, in turn, sisterhood is an opportunity for her to feel important and cared for, as Nel looks up to her. Sula “who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes” (53) learns to be more consistent and careful with Nel. Besides, when she is shocked with Hannah’s remark to her friends about not liking her, she desperately runs to her room, but Nel, waiting downstairs, tells her to go back down: “Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). In this instance, their sisterhood comforts Sula and allows her to forget about her negative experience. Metaphorically, Nel is a ray of sunshine in Sula’s troubled existence.

Sula has a strong temper and tries to defy authority. Through sisterhood and Nel’s supporting presence, she becomes even more empowered as she asserts her strength on different occasions. For example, every day on the way back from school, Nel has to take a longer way home to avoid meeting the Irish boys who used

to harass black girls. One day coming back from school, Sula convinces her to go home the shorter way, even though they would have to face the boys. Feeling secure because of Nel's presence, Sula is able to scare them away:

Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh . . . Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. 'If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?' (54-5)

Although Sula hurts herself accidentally, she turns the situation around and is determined to face them. Through sisterhood, Sula is encouraged to face the boys as she is determined to help Nel.

Therefore, both girls are deeply affected by their sisterhood, but in different ways: "Sula's preservation of her self allows Nel to limn boundaries between herself and her mother; in turn, Nel's attention to details of connection and her calm consistency allow Sula's rigid boundaries to become more fluid" (Gillespie and Kubitschek 41). Nel becomes more confident and dares to defy her mother's authority, while Sula becomes more centered and secured, and both become more empowered.

Some critics argue that the sisterhood between Nel and Sula is also marked by a sexual overtone. Smith states that *Sula* "works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship . . . but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family" (417-18). I believe that it may be possible that both girls have a sexual encounter as they both discover their own bodies. The scene in which

Nel and Sula are digging a hole together can imply a sexual involvement between both girls. The narrator describes their actions as follows: “[t]hey lay in the grass, their foreheads almost touching . . . Sula’s head rested on her arm, an undone braid coiled around her wrist . . . Underneath their dresses flesh tightened and shivered in the high coolness” (58). The girls are lying together and they slowly touch each other as Sula rests on Nel’s arm and, a reference is made to a coolness they feel, suggesting they are experiencing a different sensation. The two are completely in tune:

In concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades [of a twig] up and down, up and down . . . Nel found a thick twig and . . . pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began rearing up rooted grass. (58)

This repetitive movement, the reference to the nakedness of the twigs, and their natural identification with each other can suggest that the girls are sexually discovering each other’s body and their own bodies. Nel and Sula do not even need to talk or look at each other to understand what they are doing because they are so intrinsically connected that their actions are almost one.

On the other hand, Hudson-Weems describes sisterhood as “an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other” (66). It seems, however, that Sula and Nel’s possible sexual interaction does not jeopardize their bond, but on the contrary, it makes them stronger as they assume control over their sexualities. It may be argued that sisterhood also allows them to discover their own bodies by experimenting with each other. Their women bond seems to know no boundaries.

In *Sula*, sisterhood is empowering because of “the subject’s choice to be in solidarity, a choice that reveals a level of agency” (Quashie 195). By choosing to stand together, the characters become stronger. Nel and Sula’s bond helps them find their place as black girls in a sexist and racist society. Through sisterhood, they become aware that they have to “fight to love [them]selves” (Quashie 196) because they are not usually encouraged to accept their own selves, much less care for themselves. Therefore, it may be argued that in Morrison’s *Sula*, sisterhood gives the women characters the opportunity to understand and develop their subjectivities by identifying with one another and, thus, struggle for empowerment.

## 2.2 Sisterhood and Empowerment in *A Mercy*

In *A Mercy*, the women bonds among the characters help them survive in a patriarchal and slave holding society. Rebekka’s journey across the Atlantic is not easy, as she is going to an unknown place to marry a man she never met. But the friends she makes turn the trip into a learning experience for all of the women characters. This section discusses how sisterhood affects the characters and helps Rebekka become confident to face her future husband, Jacob, and life in a new and hostile environment.

Aboard the *Angelus*, there are seven other women who, along with Rebekka are the last to board the ship because of their lower rank. Their similarity is based on their class, and from the very beginning there is a different treatment in relation to gender, race and class: “Rebekka learned . . . soon as they were separated from males and the better-classed women and led to a dark space below next to the animal stalls” (81). Similar to the other women, Rebekka is separated from the men, and because she is poor, she is also separated from the wealthier women on board. The lower-

class women have to fit themselves into a tiny space where “[a]nyone taller than five feet hunched and lowered her head to move around” (81). As they have no other option, the women have to face the poor conditions of the ship. Even if Rebekka has the privilege of the white race, she is still confined by what Friedman refers to as “other constituents of identity” (5) such as gender and class.

Each woman has a distinct history to tell:

One, Anne, had been sent away in disgrace by her family. Two, Judith and Lydia, were prostitutes ordered to choose between prison or exile. Lydia was accompanied by her daughter, Patty... Elizabeth was the daughter, or so she said, of an important Company agent . . . Dorothea, was a cutpurse whose sentence was the same as the prostitutes. Rebekka, alone, her passage prepaid, was to be married. (82)

Despite their particular backgrounds, these women characters interact with each other and “[t]ogether they lightened the journey; made it less hideous than it surely would have been without them” (82). They turn their experience in the small dark space into a positive one. They start talking and are curious to learn about each other’s lives. They play games and tricks, as when Dorothea, for example, “removed a shoe and wiggled her toes . . . Then . . . she folded the frayed wool under her toes. Replacing the shoe, she smiled at Anne” (83). Dorothea questions Anne: “Is behavior the reason your family put you to sea?” (83). Anne uncomfortably answers: “I’m visiting my uncle and aunt.” (83). As Lydia also mocks Anne she yells: “Cows!” (84). With this remark all the women, including Anne, start to laugh. Dorothea and Lydia do not intend to hurt Anne, but rather to tease her a bit because of her innocent looks. Through their sisterhood, the women become closer as they

interact with each other, make jokes and slowly start to understand one another, making their journey more bearable and transforming it into a learning experience.

Food also brings these women together. As Rebekka says she has some cheese, the other women say “aw, lovely. Let’s have tea” (84). Each woman contributes with something: “Judith spread her shawl on the lid of a box. Elizabeth retrieved from her trunk a kettle and a set of spoons . . . Lydia heated the water in the kettle over the lamp . . . both Judith and Dorothea had rum hidden in their sacks” (85). Together they create an environment of solidarity as they come together and share their food and make a welcoming lunch. Food, in this case, represents not only bodily nurturance but also emotional care. Unconsciously, they “began to imitate what they thought were the manners of queens” (84) and Rebekka later remembers how “each of them, including the ten-year-old, lifted her little finger and angled it out” (85). They began to like each other as their bonding makes them feel important and powerful. Their proximity through sisterhood makes the characters want to behave respectfully by showing kindness and solidarity to each other. During those days “[w]retched as was the space they crouched in, it was nevertheless black where a past did not haunt nor a future beckon. Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither” (85). Alone in the ship, without having to depend on any male figure, the women are free to be themselves, share their thoughts and experiences and forget the vicissitudes that await them on their arrival.

The women aboard the ship help Rebekka enormously as: “[t]heir alehouse wit, their know-how laced with their low expectations of others and high levels of self-approval, their quick laughter, amused and encouraged Rebekka” (82). Their outgoing manner and actions allow her to develop confidence in herself: “If she had feared her own female vulnerability, traveling alone to a foreign country to wed a



stranger, these women corrected her misgivings” (82). Rebekka starts to believe she has her own worth and that she will find the strength to survive in the New World. Through sisterhood the women characters share with each other the small supply of food they have because they sympathize with one another and grow to like and esteem each other. They create a pleasant environment through their alliance and a space in which they can care for themselves by caring for the other while enjoying their temporary freedom.

### 2.3 Sisterhood across Different Races and Ethnicities

In this section, I discuss how sisterhood can also represent a bond among women from various races and ethnicities. It is important to note that as Audre Lorde states “there is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that in fact does not exist” (189). The idea of a romantic sisterhood is refuted in this study, being seen instead as complex interactions among a heterogeneous group of women characters. Although this study defends the notion of sisterhood among women from distinct races and ethnicities, some critics, such as Collins, consider the relationship of sisterhood limited to black women (29). Even so, women from different heritage and backgrounds may also share similar traits as well as analogous experiences as they too are often subject to oppression and discrimination, creating a possibility for their sisterhood to flourish.

Differences among women characters are not ignored as these “differences present the most serious threat to the mobilizations of women’s joint power” (Lorde 190). Instead, these distinctions are highlighted showing how they affect women bonding. To exclude women characters who are not black from the possibility of bonding through sisterhood can create stereotypes and contribute to a false notion

that all black women are equal and they are the only ones who can understand and help each other. This notion would support another kind of discrimination, substituting the exclusion of colored and white women with the social exclusion of black women. It is important to note that, as hooks points out, “[n]o transformative interventions can take place to end oppression and exploitation as long as we critique one form of domination and embrace another” (*Outlaw* 204). hooks's statement shows the importance of not excluding women based on preordained biological aspects because it opens space for a new kind of marginalization. In addition, as Quashie's explains:

The practice of being girlfriends . . . is not, cannot be, exclusive to an/others who are Black women. That is, the notion of being girlfriends, upon which the identification depends, is rooted in a political and spiritual solidarity, not merely a solidarity based on being, essentially a Black woman. In fact, the ultimate ethos of the identity is against reliance on easy coalitions and subjectivities that are granted.

(203)

Sisterhood therefore depends on solidarity among women and should not be restricted to any biological determination, but should rather be marked by a willingness to care and help other marginalized women. Likewise, Elizabeth Schultz defends the possibility of interracial friendships by stating that: “One's capacity for compassion, generosity, humor, and wonder is the basis for the friendship between two women” (69). The fundamental aspect of sisterhood is based on the women characters' ability to come together in different ways and is not restricted to particular races or ethnicities.

Despite the difficulties that can arise from the ties among women from distinct heritages and backgrounds, Lorde ends her article “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” with a positive tone: “we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals” (195). In this sense, it is necessary to consider women’s various experiences and it is equally important to discuss how sisterhood allows the women characters to struggle for the same objectives. Bonds of sisterhood are not homogenous but rich in diversity as women from diverse ethnicities and races suffer different forms of discrimination. And still, they come together hoping to challenge such confinements.

hooks suggests that, instead of adopting a utopian vision of sisterhood, it is important to focus on a real sisterhood, one that considers the interests of everyone involved (*Feminism* 16). The heterogeneous experiences of women and their specific needs should be considered for sisterhood to be effective. Besides, to establish unrealistic goals for women bonding, such as an immediate and complete liberation of women, or the end to patriarchy overnight can cause the impression that sisterhood does not in fact work or even exist. Actually, sisterhood can have many positive effects on the lives of women, but it is important to consider the specific social, cultural and the historical context as well as the experiences and backgrounds of each woman involved.

This section considers bonds of sisterhood among women characters from different races and ethnicities in *A Mercy*. The friendships among Florens, an African American slave, and Jane, a white girl from a Presbyterian community; and Lina, a Native American slave, and Rebekka, her white European owner, are considered in order to expand the discussion.

While on her errand to get the blacksmith, Florens feels exhausted and she goes to a large house in search of shelter during the night. She describes the situation: “I decide to knock on the door of the largest house, the one that will have a servant inside . . . It is in the single lit house in the village so I choose to go there” (106). From the inside of the house, comes Widow Ealing and Florens describes her as “much taller than Mistress or Lina and has green eyes. The rest of her is a brown frock and a white cap. Red hair edges it” (106). Florens is impressed by her looks because she has not seen women with such complexions before. The widow is hesitant to help Florens and asks her many questions: “Who hath sent you she asks . . . She looks behind me left and right and asks if I have no protection, no companion . . . She narrows her eyes and asks if I am of this earth or elsewhere . . . Christian or heathen” (106-7). She is very cautious as she lives in a small conservative religious community. Although she knows Florens may bother the community, the Widow Ealing allows her to stay.

Florens enters the house and only her after eating something she notices a girl is also there. The girl gets up and Florens watches her: “She stands then and limps to the table where the lamp burns. Holding it waist high she lifts her skirts. I see dark blood beetling down her legs. In the light pouring over her pale skin her wounds look like live jewels” (108). The Widow tells Florens: “This is my daughter Jane . . . Those lashes may save her life” (108). Jane suffers the consequences of not being considered human in that restricted religious community because of the shape of her eye. Florens witnesses her “holding her face in her hands while the Widow freshens the leg wounds. New strips of blood gleam among the dry ones” (109). To prove to the community that her daughter is not a demon, the Widow Ealing has to make Jane bleed as it was believed that only humans could bleed.

In the morning, when the members of the community arrive in the house, they are astonished by Florens's appearance: "One of the women covers her eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth" (111). The town representatives, who were coming to see Jane, forget about her, concentrating on what they perceive as Florens's disturbing blackness. Everyone starts to point at her and to talk about what is to be done about this mysterious and bizarre girl. Florens says: "I shout, please sir. I think they have shock that I can talk. Let me show you my letter I say quieter. It proves I am nobody's minion but my Mistress" (111). Jane's mother gets the letter "and offers it but no one will touch it. The man orders me to place it on the table" (111). The town representatives are shocked and, the little girl does not stop crying, so everyone rushes out and orders Florens and Jane to stay in the house. When both girls are left alone, they have time to perceive each other's suffering and their rejection by that community. Florens sympathizes with Jane's misery and Jane is thankful because for once she is not the major focus and the problem for the community and also identifies with Florens.

Both girls know the difficulty of being misjudged and marginalized. In fact, they have a lot in common. Their bond stems from their recognition of their status as outsiders. Consequently, Jane decides to ignore the orders given by the head of the community and leads Florens away from the village by showing her an escape route. Florens explains: "We come to a stream . . . Daughter Jane hands me the cloth of eggs. She explains how I am to go" (114). Jane shows her how to get away and gives her food for the journey. This event shows the strength of women bonds and that sisterhood is possible among women from different races and ethnicities because their "coupling is an alliance, a political and spiritual union" (Quashie 207). An

alliance between Florens and Jane is possible because they identify with and care for each other, and because of their shared otherness.

Angela Davis argues that “sisterhood between black and white women was indeed possible and as long as it stood on a firm foundation it could give birth to earthshaking accomplishments” (104). Florens and Jane’s friendship shows that it is possible for black and white women to establish sisterhood bonds as they unite and help each other even if temporarily. A comparison can be made with Morrison’s *Beloved*. In the novel, while Sethe is running away she sees Amy, a white woman, who helps her give birth during her escape. While analyzing *Beloved*, Davies suggests that these bonds are “representative of the paradoxical separations and commonalities among women” (140). A similar view can also be applied to Florens and Jane’s sisterhood. Describing Sethe and Amy’s situation, Davies recognizes that “in a society stratified along race, class and gender lines . . . [they] may form a temporary alliance around the need to give birth, inevitably they take divergent paths to freedom” (140). Sethe and Amy are momentarily united in a bond that saves Sethe’s life. Florens’s bond with Jane is also temporary, but nonetheless crucial, as Amy helps Florens escape. Although they will lead different paths afterwards, they care for each other and come together through sisterhood.

Another important sisterhood bond in *A Mercy* arises between Lina and Rebekka. Lina is the first woman slave Jacob buys to help him with the farm. She arrives before Rebekka, who is suspicious of her, but as both are left alone in the farm most of the time, they slowly become fond of each other. They eventually become friends and when “the first infant was born, Lina handled it so tenderly, with such knowing, Rebekka was ashamed of her early fears and pretended she’d never had them” (75). Both were quite young, in their late teens, and, although Rebekka is

the mistress of the house, she is still inexperienced and needs Lina's help, who in turn, longs for companionship.

Their class and racial difference are minimized as there is a "focus on building community" (hooks, *Sister* 154) as they try to create a pleasant environment for them to live in. Both understand that "fraudulent competition was worth nothing on land that demanding" (53) and they "were company for each other" (53). In order to work the land they have no time to think about their differences, they have to stick together to overcome the hardships imposed by the land and weather. Thus, Lina and Rebekka:

Became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other's arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence. Not only because one had to hold the head while the other one tied the trotters. Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. Together, by trial and error they learned. (53)

Sisterhood offers both a way to stay alive because as long as they can count on each other, they are able to endure the difficulties of trying to run a farm by themselves and compensate for their vulnerability of being women in a man's world. As the narrator comments: "Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay. And both had come to terms" (98). Despite their differences, they are united through sisterhood by identifying with each other's limitations and helping each other survive as two women mostly alone in the wilderness.

As I showed in this section, Lina, Rebekka, Florens and Jane come together in order to help each other, even if they identify with each other only temporarily. To exclude their bonds from sisterhood would be similar to the act of disregarding mother-daughter bonds among women without biological connections or ignore motherhood that does not fit the traditional pattern of love and caring. Sisterhood has to be considered according to specific circumstances and has to be problematized, because the women characters, more often than not, do care about each other. However, they are often judged too harshly as they are expected to completely transcend their environment like supernatural heroes.

In Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy*, sisterhood is marked by complex interactions among women from different backgrounds and experiences. In *Sula*, sisterhood helps Nel and Sula in distinct ways, as Nel becomes more confident and Sula more at ease. Their bonding also affects their subjectivities because through their identification with each other, they come to love themselves by first loving each other. In this sense, Nel and Sula become stronger.

In *A Mercy*, sisterhood also affects the women characters. As discussed, during Rebekka's crossing of the Atlantic, she bonds with the other women characters on the ship. Despite their various histories, they unite and exchange experiences. Through their bonding Rebekka begins to believe in herself and in her own worth. Furthermore, in *A Mercy*, women bonds illustrate the possibility of sisterhood among women characters from different races and ethnicities. Sisterhood is present between Lina and Rebekka as both women rely on each other to overcome the hardships of being women and alone in the wilderness. Although Florens is a black slave, and Jane a white Presbyterian, through sisterhood they also overcome their differences. Their encounter is brief but nevertheless crucial because they



provide alternative circumstances for each other by defying the rigid structures of a narrow-minded community. It is important to mention that the bond between Florens and Lina is considered, in this thesis, as an alternative type of mother-daughter bond as discussed in chapter one, because through their bonding each comes to play the roles of mother and daughter. Their alliance is not necessarily better or deeper but it simply means that their bonding is similar in various aspects to that between mother and daughter, rather than to that between sisters.

Through an analysis based on commonality and complementarity, this chapter illustrates how sisterhood in Morrison's *Sula* and *Mercy* is marked by a complex interaction among the women characters which cannot be determined by preconceived stereotypes or essentialisms. In the novels analyzed, friendship among African American women and women from different races, ethnicities and backgrounds create the opportunity for the characters to shape their subjectivities, enabling them to fight against victimization as well as to struggle for empowerment.

It is interesting to observe that, although the novel *A Mercy* was published twenty six years after *Sula*, each novel still places a strong focus on sisterhood, but presents it differently among the women characters. In *Sula*, sisterhood is focused on Nel and Sula, both young African American girls, while *A Mercy* describes a sisterhood among women characters from distinct races and ethnicities as well as various other women bonds. This may suggest that nowadays greater importance is given to the interaction among women, respecting their differences and to how sisterhood can help each woman. More fluid and dialectic categories are accepted as essentialism is rejected and each character is perceived not only through their complex singularities but also through the similarities that make their union successful.

Although sisterhood can help women characters in different ways, as shown in both novels, most of the women bonding will rupture at some point. In fact, the rupture of sisterhood is not caused by a lack of solidarity among the women characters, but rather because there is an alteration of the ethics of care which consequently weakens women bonds. Further discussion about the break of women bonds is elaborated on in the next chapter in which the facts that contribute to such ruptures and their consequences are analyzed.

## Chapter 3: The Alteration of the Ethics of Care

The ethics of care respects rather than removes itself from the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships.  
(Held 11)

To define an ethics of care is to welcome different discussions encompassing elements from various areas. It is pointless to try to devise a homogenous or single meaning of such a term. In this chapter, I provide a discussion about the meaning of the expression “ethics of care.” Then, I focus on how its principles are altered by the slave holding society in *A Mercy* and by a society still marked by the consequences of slavery in *Sula*. The distortion of the ethics of care causes many women bonds to rupture as family and social relations are inverted to best suit economic and ideological interests. Afterwards, I consider how the women characters cope in different ways with the severing of bonds and how, as a consequence, many have haunted memories, are unable to have a stable relationship, turn to violent acts and even become disoriented.

### 3.1 Defining the Ethics of Care

Critics have different opinions about how to delineate the boundaries for such a flexible term. It is argued that the main characteristic of the ethics of care is solidarity among the characters, as illustrated in Morrison’s *Sula* and *A Mercy*. Even

so, there is no assumption about the universality of the meaning of ethics of care as other definitions may still be accurate but are beyond the scope of this work.

The ethics of care is characterized by vocabulary from distinct fields that try to delineate a clear notion of the term. It is important to consider that these ponderings and meanings are interwoven with complex notions and analogies, creating an intriguing discussion. A dialogue between feminist criticism and the studies on the ethics of care can be established as the discussion enhances the understanding of the definition of this expression. The emergence of the feminist movement in the 1960s can be regarded as a rebellion against women's subordination to men, as well as against the supposed feminine nature of caring (Sevenhuijsen 5). Seen as limiting, caring was viewed as an obstacle incompatible with the incessant quest for women's independence. As the feminist movement becomes consolidated in several areas, various reflections on new and old themes have caught critics' attention. In this context, the ethics of care, once completely rejected, has recently appeared in the feminist agenda through alternative perspectives.

In a book dedicated to the subject, Virginia Held presents an approach with specific characteristics of the ethics of care, associating it with moral ethics and the ethics of justice. She initially defines ethics of care as a cluster of practices among individuals with horizon beyond family and friends, in fields such as medicine, law and international relations (3). Thus, the ethics of care is not limited to biological or social categorization as it occurs in different scenarios and refers to the cultivation of embracing acts that foster social connections and cooperation. In this sense, the ethics of care focuses on trust and in the response to the needs of others. On the other hand, the ethics of justice focuses on individual rights, equality and abstract notions

(Held 15). This distinction shows that the ethics of justice is different because it is concerned with individual rights, with the separation between one and the other.

In my analysis of Morrison's novels, I take into consideration Held's arguments to establish the ethics of care as being characterized by solidarity, mutual actions of concern and caring acts towards others. As Held adopts a maternal figure as the model of her analysis, she has received criticism from those who argue that she is perpetuating an ideal model of woman who cares for everyone. Even though she adopts a woman figure to illustrate her ponderings, her work is not necessarily based on essentialisms because the model is based on caring individuals, be they represented by a woman or a man. Nevertheless, she associates the mother figure with care and compassion as opposed to justice. As Selma Sevenhuijens argues, this principle may erroneously reproduce arguments based on dichotomous oppositions (13). Held's distinction is, therefore, set on slippery paradigms because it opens space for a binary distinction between women and men by associating women with care and men with justice. Even though emphasis is given to Held's relevant definitions of the ethics of care, in my work I place no emphasis on women as essentially caring subjects or on a simplistic belief that caring is exclusively a feminine characteristic.

Sevenhuijens does not assign motherhood a special space in the ethics of care because she believes such reference may result in the dependence on the mythological maternal figure (17). As is the case with the novels analyzed here, motherhood may be interwoven with the ethics of care, but such term is not limited to motherly expressions. This work analyzes motherhood and sisterhoods showing how neither bond is seen as more powerful or superior, as alternative perspectives are used to challenge preconceived stereotypes commonly associated with such

bonds. Although the scope of this essay is limited to women bonds, there is nothing that restricts the ethics of care only to women. Thus, other relevant aspects and manifestations of an ethics of care are mentioned whenever needed to enhance the discussion.

Cynthia Willet discussing maternal ethics, specifically in the context of slavery, points out the importance of challenging the “altruism-egoism dichotomy of traditional ethics” (9). It is crucial to elaborate alternative characteristics of the ethics of care, which, although marked by solidarity among individuals, does not imply that there is an ideal selfless person involved. As hooks explains, “rather than seeing giving care as diminishing us, we will experience the kind of care giving that enriches the giver. It is fundamentally rooted in the ability to empathize” (*Sisters* 168). hooks's comments are relevant because they stress the fact that, although caring has been perceived as a feminine trait and, therefore, has often been rejected as outdated, the focus now is on the positive aspect of care for both women and men. This topic does not place women in a passive and confining role, but rather highlights the benefits of caring or the problems arising from its rupture. As Gillespie and Kubitscheck emphasize, it is important to “reclaim caretaking by focusing on its empowering, generative aspects” (Gillespie and Kubitscheck 29). Thus, the ethics of care can have healing aspects as individuals may benefit from such interactions.

### 3.2 Changes in the Ethics of Care

This part of the chapter focuses on how slavery and its aftermath alter the ethics of care among the characters in *Sula* and *A Mercy*. The notion of an ethics of care is incompatible with slavery because this institution confines individuals to

inhumane roles and disseminates a notion of superiority based on race which causes individuals to lack solidarity with each other as they incorporated a distorted view of care. I initially discuss how the alteration of the ethics of care affects motherhood in both novels. In *Sula*, the characters analyzed are Eva with her children Hannah and Plum, as well as Hannah and her daughter Sula. In *A Mercy*, the characters chosen for analysis are Florens and her mother, because they have the central mother-daughter conflict. Then, I analyze how sisterhood is disturbed by the changes in the ethics of care illustrated in the novels. In *Sula*, Nel and Sula's close sisterhood bonding is severed because of a variation in the ethics of care that they cannot overcome. In *A Mercy*, Lina's actions towards Sorrow are analyzed in light of the alteration of the ethics of care as they are both women slaves. It is important to note that in these novels, women characters resort to actions that are a reflection of a society tainted by slavery and its aftermath, as is the case with Rebekka, who eventually adopts a fallacious notion of the ethics of care. I focus on how the changes in the ethics of care force women to behave unexpectedly, and assert that their actions cannot be used to completely condemn them, nor simply classify them as good or bad.

In *Sula*, the alteration of the ethics of care greatly affects motherhood. Even though the women characters are forced to stray from the traditional representations of an ethics of care, they are nevertheless judged by such traditional paradigms. When Hannah asks Eva, if she ever played with them, Eva answers: "Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just 'cause you got it good now you think it was always this good?" (68). Although Eva's answer might seem harsh, her experiences and constant struggles have shaped her way of showing her feelings and her practical attitude towards life. Another misunderstanding between Hannah and Eva happens when

Hannah asks: “Mamma, did you ever love us?” (67). She thinks for a second and answers: “No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin” (67). Once again, Eva’s responses are not the conventional outburst of explicit love that her daughter wants, but it does not mean that she does not love her children. In Eva’s generation, mothers were lucky if they could manage to keep their children alive and close to them. As she is left by BoyBoy with young children to raise she has no time to think and express her emotions because she has to concentrate on finding a job to make ends meet, to feed her children and care for them, as they are too young to be left alone. For Eva, simply ensuring her children’s survival is a demonstration of an overwhelming love. Hannah continues to question her “But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn’t thinkin’ ‘bout . . .” (69) and Eva replies:

No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here came a night. With you all coughin’ and watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleeping’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (69)

Hannah does not understand the context from which her mother is speaking, the arduous days and nights Eva had to endure just to make sure her children were alive. For Eva, this is the ultimate expression of love. This experience of feeling rejected by her mother greatly affects Hannah and has an impact on her feelings toward her own daughter Sula. Hannah interprets her mother’s response according to the conventional motherly attributes which would classify Eva as loveless because she does not say she loves her children. But as Rich states: “Eva Peace . . . is forced



to pour all her forces into fighting for her children's survival; her maternal love expresses itself in action to the last" (xxvi). Eva's love is explicit through her actions, but her daughter does not understand this important detail. She loves Hannah so much that when she sees that Hannah is burning, she reacts quickly:

Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. (76)

Eva is on her bedroom, on the top floor of the house, but she does not hesitate and jumps to try to reach Hannah on time to help her. Eva's desperate attempt to save Hannah illustrates the immensity of her love. She has always loved Hannah but because of the alteration of the ethics of care, caused by her social, cultural and financial constraints, she does not express her emotions in the traditional way her daughter would like her to. Even so, when her children are hurting, as is the case with Hannah, Eva is unconcerned with the difficulty of saving them and is always ready to take action.

Likewise, Sula judges her mother with the same idealization of the maternal role and, like Hannah, she interprets the situation wrongly by placing unrealistic expectations on her mother. As mentioned before, Sula suffers greatly when she hears her mother saying to her friends that she loves but does not necessarily like her. Sula does not understand the context her mother grew up in, the events she had been

exposed to, and her way of reasoning about the world. In the same way Hannah fails to understand Eva, Sula is unable to contextualize Hannah's comments and understand her perspective. Hannah's reactions are probably the result of what she herself had gone through with her own mother, as she too feels rejected. Sula becomes lost and does not know exactly how to react to her mother or to the other people around her. When Eva is desperately trying to save Hannah from burning, she remembers that "she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking" (78). She is shocked by Sula's reactions and tries to convince herself that her granddaughter was probably numb from seeing her mother on fire. In fact, Sula's action is not easy to comprehend, but it is a direct consequence of the alteration of the ethics of care that distances the characters. Sula cannot seem to distinguish between what is important or not, and what is instinctive or not. She is disappointed by Hannah not liking her, and she is unable to take any action as she is paralyzed by what she experiences. Similarly to when Chicken Little falls in the river bank, Sula is paralyzed and does not seem to know what to do. The alteration of the ethics of care strangely affects Sula and her actions because she cannot cope with the feeling of maternal rejection derived from her misinterpretation of her mother's words.

As an adult, Sula places Eva in a retirement home. The event is briefly described by the impersonal narrator: "In April two men came with a stretcher and she didn't even have time to comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas" (94). Sula does not explain or warn her grandmother, but while talking to Nel, she says: "She didn't belong in that house. Digging around in the cupboards, picking up pots and ice picks" (100). Through her remark, it seems that just like Eva, she is being practical and taking action when something bothers her, except for the fact that Eva always acts on behalf of her family, and Sula pushes her loved ones

away. Sula goes on to say: "I'm scared of her, Nellie. That's why . . . You don't know her. Did you know she burnt Plum? . . . It's true . . . And when I got back here she was planning to do it to me too" (100). Sula does not understand why her grandmother kills her uncle and she is afraid that because she and Eva are not getting along, the same will happen to her. In turn, Eva becomes scared of Sula and, after their conversation, she only sleeps with her bedroom locked. The alteration of the ethics of care causes mistrust and miscommunication between the characters and weakens the women bonds as they react according to an often erroneous interpretation of events.

The changes in the ethics of care also affect the mother-son relationship between Eva and Plum. After he returns from the war, he seems to suffer from shell-shock as he cannot insert back into the community. He quits his job and begins locking himself for days in his room to use drugs. Eva cannot stand watching him being slowly consumed by his drug addiction any longer. One night, she goes into his room and: "With a swing and a swoop she arrived at Plum's door and pushed it open with the tip of one crutch . . . She sat down and gathered Plum into her arms" (46). Eva holds him close and has mixed feelings because although she loves him, she cannot bear the fact that the son she loves is lost in a world of drugs. Eva recalls memories of his childhood and "lifted her tongue to the edge of her lip to stop the tears from running into her mouth. Rocking, rocking" (47). As she is holding and rocking him as if he were still a baby, showing her love for and concern about him, she becomes aware that he is not a child anymore, but as he refuses to live as an adult, she once again has to interfere in his life. In the same way Eva puts an ending to Plum's misery when he is just a baby by helping him restore his bowel movements, she decides to take action into her own hands and free him from his

dependence on drugs. She goes into the kitchen to get gasoline and sets him on fire. Interestingly, he is not scared or desperate and the event is portrayed without conveying a violent image: “He opened his eyes and saw what he imaged was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought . . . he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep” (47). Plum feels a certain tranquility as he believes he is experiencing a cleansing or a transcendental moment and he relaxes and falls into sleep. Eva may have seen her actions as extremely painful and difficult, but as a mother, she believes she has the obligation to save her son, and in this case, ending Plum’s life is a way to put him out of his misery of drug addiction.

A reference to Morrison’s *Beloved* is relevant here, because Sethe, a runaway slave, also struggles against the contradictions imposed on the black mother. As Sethe is fleeing from the plantation with her children, she becomes desperate when the slave hunter approaches. She is determined to save her children from slavery because she cannot imagine them suffering the same cruelties she has. She believes the only way to protect her baby daughter from the atrocities of slavery and set her free is by killing her. Davies argues that “Sethe’s violent action becomes an attempt to hold on to the maternal right and function” (139). The same reasoning can be applied to Eva because she believes that as a mother, it is her duty to save her son from his imprisonment in the world of drugs. Both Sethe and Eva cannot be judged as cruel mothers because their actions are a reflection of their past experiences and the alteration of the ethics of care. Like many mothers in slavery, who preferred to kill their children rather than to see them in such misery, Eva prefers to kill Plum and thus provide him with a possible way out of his enslavement to drugs. Likewise,

Sethe in *Beloved* prefers to kill her baby daughter rather than to see her suffer a lifetime of slavery.

Thus, it is important to reject dichotomous paradigms to classify characters, such as Eva and Sethe, as good or bad mothers because doing so contributes to the dissemination of the ideal and unattainable model of a perfect woman. hooks argues that: “Discussions of black subjectivity are often limited to the topic of representation of good and bad images” (*Yearning* 19). It is crucial to represent the characters and their actions moving beyond this binary distinction of good and bad, especially in the context of slavery and its aftermath in which the ethics of care is altered, as the women characters might adopt unconventional actions to care for others.

In this sense, although Eva and Sethe’s actions seem outrageous, they cannot be judged by ordinary notions of mothering because of the changes in the ethics of care. Eva is willing to sacrifice her life when she needs to support her children and when she tries to save Hannah from burning. She does whatever it takes to ensure her children’s well being. She cannot bear to see her children in great suffering and, in Plum’s case, she refuses to continue to watch him suffer because of his addiction. Freedom is so precious for her that she cannot sit and watch passively as he destroys his life with drugs. Although from moral standards she may not have the right to take away his life, her perspective and reasoning are different because she has experienced various hardships caused by the aftermath of slavery that alter the ethics of care.

Likewise, in *A Mercy*, motherhood is affected by the changes in the ethics of care. As mentioned before, there is a miscommunication between Florens and her

mother, as she believes her mother did not love her. As Florens's mother is sexually abused by D'Ortega, she is desperate for Jacob to take Florens away from the plantation. Florens does not understand her mother's action, which may be because she is young and does not fully comprehend how the context of slavery affects motherhood and bonds in general. Observing Florens's mother, it becomes clear that she acts to defend her daughter in any way she can. Like many other black mothers whose "source of strength was not some mystical power attached to motherhood, but rather their concrete experiences as slaves" (Davis 29), Florens's mother finds the courage to send Florens away for her daughter's own good. The ethics of care shifts because the manifestation of solidarity and care is bound to slavery. Black mothers have to be considered according to the context of slavery which means that "envisioning mother-child separation [may be seen] as a form of caring" (Henderson 44). As it becomes clear, in the last chapter of the narrative, Florens's mother acts out of love, hoping to give her daughter a better life.

In addition, sisterhood also changes because of the alteration of the ethics of care. In *Sula*, Nel and Sula are best girlfriends, and their bond has many positive consequences in their lives, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, their sisterhood is broken because of the changes in the ethics of care that determine Sula's unconventional actions and Nel's conservative views. When both are older, Nel marries Jude, and Sula leaves for college and, upon Sula's returns to the Bottom, their friendship is quickly reestablished. Nel is once again happy and confident as Sula brings more liveliness to her life, and Sula becomes more centered as Nel helps her reflect on her actions and about other people's feelings. Their sisterhood ruptures when one day Nel sees Sula and Jude having sex on her own bed. The event is described through Nel's perspective "they had been down on all fours naked, not

touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all fours like (un huh, go on say it) like dogs” (105). She is shocked and cannot believe what she is seeing and has difficulty describing the situation. She expects Sula to promptly give her an explanation: “I waited for Sula to look up at me any minute and say one of those lovely college words like aesthetic or rapport, which I never understood but which I loved because they sounded so comfortable and firm” (105). Nel wants Sula to apologize and elaborate a fancy excuse for the event, but she does neither.

Nel judges Sula according to traditional views that stipulate Sula’s action as morally erroneous and not a proper conduct for a best friend. But in Sula’s mind, she did nothing improper because she has always dismissed society’s conventions and, in turn, she is shocked that Nel reacts just like the traditional wives they once criticized. She is surprised by her best friend’s behavior and comments: “Now Nel was one of them. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web . . . She had given herself over to them” (120). Sula believes that Nel has assumed the conservative feminine role she loathes and is now against her free life style. Sula is unable to perceive the pain she causes Nel.

Although Sula’s actions are controversial, she behaves as she usually does: acting on her desires and not forcing herself to follow any social conventions. Nel does not consider Sula’s experience and beliefs because she focuses on the orthodox wrongness of such act. As Jane Bakerman mentions in her analysis of *Sula*, “the pattern of failure is set . . . they [Sula and Nel] will be unable to cope with the pressures of society except by damaging themselves” (551). The alteration of the ethics of care creates the erroneous idea that Sula lacks solidarity towards Nel, and makes Nel seem too strict. In reality both care for each other, but they are unable to

communicate or to reach an understanding. Cedric Bryant argues that “Sula’s and Nel’s close bond of sisterhood is severely strained by the differences in their personalities” (739). On the contrary, I propose that the differences between the girls empower them through their sisterhood and, the end of their friendship is caused by the changes in the ethics of care. Both women become disconnected from each other and do not reestablish their friendship because they wrongly believe one does not care about the other anymore. Although their sisterhood is very strong, they eventually separate because of the alteration of the ethics of care. Although they still love each other, their actions become incomprehensible to one another.

In *A Mercy*, sisterhood is also affected by the changes in the ethics of care. There is a clear corruption of the ethics of care when Lina is helping Sorrow give birth by the riverbank. As soon as Lina helps Sorrow deliver her first baby, she takes the baby: “Lina wrapped it in a piece of sacking and set it a-sail in the widest part of the stream and far below the beaver’s dam” (123). Lina tells Sorrow the baby is dead and quickly sets the child off into the river, giving no time for her to react. Sorrow believes she hears the baby cry and she suffers from the thought that her baby is drowning. She thinks about “her baby breathing water under Lina’s palm to recede” (123). From that point on, Sorrow completely mistrusts Lina and relies even more on Twin. Lina believes that the baby is Jacob’s and realizes it would bring even more problems for them. In this case, Lina acts according to what she perceives to be a less damaging alternative for their survival. She is forced to make an unconventional compromise to ensure that she and Sorrow outlive the atrocities of slavery as there is no protection for two women slaves. The ethics of care are altered because Lina does not hesitate to put Sorrow’s baby in the river, although it is not clear if the baby is alive as Sorrow thinks it is. Nevertheless, Lina does not act with



the intention of hurting her. She simply acts according to her instincts to ensure their immediate survival and, to maintain a peaceful existence on the farm, as she is close to Rebekka. Even though the alteration of ethics of care does not necessarily represent lack of solidarity among the women characters, the discrepancy of behavior and expectation causes a distancing between Lina and Sorrow.

In this context, in both *Sula* and *A Mercy*, slavery and its aftermath change the ethics of care which alters the characters' behaviors. The women characters' actions do not reflect conventional attitudes of solidarity and attachment, even though they do care about each other. In this sense, solidarity is usually present among the women characters; however, their actions differ to ensure their relative safety and their choices in life.

It is important to consider that the alteration in the ethics of care influences the characters differently based on their gender, race, and class. Although most characters in both novels resort to unconventional actions to express care, many succumb to the changes in the ethics of care by truly incorporating its damaging aspects. Such is the case with Rebekka, who at first establishes a sisterhood bond with Lina and treats Sorrow, Florens and the other slaves well, in marked contrast to the treatment they receive from the conservative, religious, racist villagers. However, by the end of the novel, she changes completely.

During Rebekka's illness she constantly thinks about her sufferings and the losses of her children and husband. When she recovers, she is transformed into a different person, cold and distant, as Florens mentions: "Mistress has cure but she is not well. Her heart is infidel. All smiles are gone" (159). She notices that although Rebekka is not sick anymore, she is not the same lively woman she was before.

Willard and Scully also notice her change and each comments on her strange behavior from a different perspective. Willard says: “Rising from her sickbed, she had taken control, in a manner of speaking, but avoided as too tiring tasks she used to undertake with gusto . . . planted nothing . . . her time spent reading a Bible or entertaining one or two people from the village” (145). Rebekka is traumatized by her lack of power to do anything to help her children, her husband and even herself, when she was sick. She seems to try to acquire some control by adopting the principles of her religiously conservative and prejudiced community which called for mistreating slaves and maintaining control by power. Scully mentions that he observes “when she beat Sorrow, had Lina’s hammock take down, advertised the sale of Florens” (155). Rebekka no longer allows Lina to express herself and live by her beliefs. She becomes jealous of Sorrow’s baby, hitting her and making her sleep outside in the cold with her baby and decides that Florens is to be sold. Rebekka associates her with her daughter Patrician because she was a little girl when she died and, around the same time, Jacob buys Florens when she is still a child. By disposing of Florens, Rebekka tries to dissociate herself from her past in an attempt to forget the suffering she underwent and erase the feeling of solidarity she used to share with them. It seems as if she suddenly becomes aware that she had tried to live ethically according to her beliefs but it only brought her harm. For that reason she then decides to act like everybody else in her village. Thus, Rebekka shows an alteration in the ethics of care as she dismisses her feelings for Lina, Sorrow, Florens and the other workers, while trying to assume a role of superiority based on race and class. Even so, Rebekka should not be judged too harshly because although her actions are cruel, she reflects the inhuman principles of the slave holding society she decides to side with, which clearly alters any ethics of care.

In Rita Bergenholtz's analysis of *Sula*, she shows that there is no clear cut way to judge the women characters' actions by asking some pertinent questions: "Should we admire Sula's courage, her determination to be free and to 'make herself'? Or should we loathe her for engaging in casual sex with her best friend's husband?" (92). Lina's, Rebekka's and Sula's actions can, in fact, be viewed through different perspectives which may even be contradictory. As Florens enquires in her narration at the beginning of *A Mercy*: "One question is who is responsible?" (3). In these complex and intricate narratives, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say who is to blame for the misfortune that befalls several women characters. McDowell also mentions that in *Sula*:

The narrative insistently blurs and confuses . . . binary oppositions. It glories in paradox and ambiguity beginning with the prologue that describes the setting, the Bottom, situated spatially in the top. We enter a new world here, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/ and, full of shifts and contradictions. (80)

Thus, the narrative is interwoven with mysteries and boundaries that are not fixed but rather flexible as the characters are trying to care for themselves and others. A parallel can be made between *Sula* and *A Mercy* as it is impossible to judge the characters through simplistic views and dichotomous analysis of goodness and evil. A certain instability in the women characters' actions may be said to be caused by slavery and its aftermath which often blurs distinctions between right and wrong. The characters' actions need to be considered in relation to what they have experienced. In this sense, women characters and their attitudes cannot be divided into binary oppositions because they are often responding to some form of alteration of the

ethics of care. Although they may still show solidarity among themselves, they are forced to shape their actions differently from expected demonstrations of concern, sometimes even succumbing to the altered ethics of care.

### 3.3 The Consequences of the Ruptures of Women Bonds

As the alteration of the ethics of care weakens women bonds, each character copes differently with the severing of motherhood and sisterhood relationships. This section focuses on how the women characters cope with the ruptures of such bonds. I shall start by discussing the women characters in *Sula* and *A Mercy* who have haunted memories and nightmares because of the alteration of the ethics of care. The characters analyzed are Florens, Sula and Nel. Sula and Florens's inability to arrive at a balanced emotional relationship is also discussed as it is caused by their traumatic experiences stemming from their mother-daughter bonding. I also analyze how the alteration of ethics of care causes Florens to become disoriented and turn to violent acts.

In *A Mercy*, the alteration to the ethics of care caused by slavery leads to a rupture of motherhood bonds and shapes Florens's life. She misinterprets her mother's actions, constantly having the same haunted dreams:

I wake with a little scream in my mouth . . . I quiet down. That is a better dream than a minha mãe standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her. (101)

From her nightmares Florens is able to see that she is missing something, that her mother tries to explain but she fails to hear her and cannot make sense of what it is. She does not understand what is implied when her mother says “take the girl, my daughter” (7) to Jacob. This memory haunts her, afflicting her with constant flashbacks of this traumatic event that deeply affects her life.

Judith Herman explains that “a traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without a clear memory of the event” (34). Florens finds herself in this position, because although she has a hard time remembering precise details of her last encounter with her mother, she experiences intense and devastating feelings every time she remembers it. According to Ernst Alphen, memory is “usually seen as a special case of experience. It is not the voluntary controlled retrieval of the past itself, but rather of the experience of the past” (25). Thus, Florens has no control over her memories and she is powerless against her nightmares. As different things may trigger a bad memory, throughout the narrative, Florens is reminded of her hurtful past, even when she does not want to think about it. Susan Brison further argues that “memories of traumatic events can be themselves traumatic” (40). Florens’s constant nightmares and involuntary acts of memory of this traumatic experience cause her even more pain, because she is hurt not only by what happened but also by constantly remembering it. These agonizing memories are consequences of the changes in the ethics of care as Florens mistakenly judges her mother’s actions as a sign of carelessness and detachment.

In *Sula*, Nel also suffers from her break with Sula. She acquires in her throat a “gray ball just there . . . a ball of muddy strings” (109). This symbolic image shows how Nel is haunted by the memory of Sula and Jude together and what she sees as a betrayal of their friendship. She feels imprisoned because she is abandoned by her

husband and loses her best friend. Nel suffers intensively but she attributes her sadness to Jude's absence. In the end of the novel she realizes that in fact she has always missed Sula and cries out: "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (174). Nel remembers that together they formed a complete self, symbolized by the expression "girlgirlgirl," and that through their sisterhood they were able to overcome any difficulties by creating their own perspective of life.

Although Sula learns not to show any emotion, she is hurt by Hannah's comments of loving but not liking her (57) and, by Nel's conservative judgment. Brison explains that traumatic events can generate different responses such as haunted memories and sleep disorders (40). Sula too has a recurrent nightmare that intertwines her painful experiences, when she is older and she sick in her bed:

Then she had the dream again. The Clabber Girl Baking Powder lady was smiling and beckoning to her, one hand under her apron. When Sula came near she disintegrated into white dust, which Sula was hurriedly trying to stuff into the pockets of their blue-flannel housecoat. The disintegration was awful to see, but worse was the feel of the powder - its starchy slipperiness as she tried to collect it by handfuls . . . . At last it covered her, filled her eyes, her nose, her throat, and she woke gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke. Pain took hold. (147-48)

Sula has the same agonizing dream involving a woman with a mysterious identity, over and over again. One possible reading is that she feels entrapped by the constant memory of this disintegrated girl, possibly her best friend Nel, who is hurt by her actions. The disintegrated woman may also represent Sula herself as she is

hurt too by Hannah's comments and Nel's reactions. The "Clabber Girl" can represent the conservative role of women which Sula rejects, as she does not mind to see this traditional figure disintegrate. But at the same time, she wants to stuff her pockets with the powder, or to keep some of this ideal picture, turning the nightmare into an obscure mixture of desire and aversion. The fact the girl "disintegrated into white dust" might also be meaningful, pointing to her destruction by the values of a white society she loathes so much. In fact, this woman may also be a symbolic figure to represent various women characters who become torn by the alteration of the ethics of care. In the nightmare, Sula's awakening to the smell of smoke may be a recollection of Hannah's burning as she remembers her cold reaction towards her mother's imminent death. Nightmares haunt Sula even though she tries to forget the negative experiences that arise from the severing of her women bonds.

Interestingly, like Nel, whose last words refer to their sisterhood, when Sula is dying in bed she thinks about Nel:

Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead . . . Sula felt her face smiling. 'Well, I'll be damned,' she thought, 'it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel.' (149)

Sula's first thought is to talk to her best friend about her discovery. Each is a part of the other as they are bound through their powerful friendship. Their sisterhood goes beyond borders and they themselves do not fully understand its power. It may be argued that Sula's sickness and the fact that she dies alone - sending Nel away despite her efforts to take care of her because she rejects any pity -

are a reflection of the alteration of the ethics of care. As she is traumatized by her interpretation of her mother's lack of love, she pushes everyone away and does not try to cultivate relationships, thinking she might be disappointed again. She incorporates the misguided changes in the ethics of care, believing she does not need anybody, but as she passes away she realizes the importance of sisterhood.

Another example of the breaking of women bonds because of the alteration of the ethics of care is illustrated by Sula's and Florens's inability to have a longstanding and mature relationship with a man. In *Sula*, even though Sula does not show her feelings, she suffers miserably from the rupture of her sisterhood with Nel and especially from her remembering of Hannah's remarks when she was young. She starts acting as if she did not care about anybody. She has various sexual encounters with married men, refusing to have a serious affectionate relationship. Bakerman states that "Sula's perceptions about sex are accumulated over the years by her mother's promiscuousness" (550). He assumes that Sula's behavior is a reflection of Hannah's attitudes. Sula's actions may be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to resemble, to connect with and to be liked by her mother. Nevertheless, an alteration of the ethics of care might also explain Sula's actions as she does long for a loving relationship but cannot seem to be able to form any long-lasting relations based on love.

It is worth mentioning that the only time when Sula starts to surrender to a loving relationship is later in the novel with Ajax, when she is an adult. Although their romance begins like the many others she has, with only sexual involvement, they eventually see each other regularly: "He [Ajax] came regularly then, bearing gifts" (125). Ajax constantly visits her and they become more involved. He is charmed by Sula because she reminds him of his mother "this was perhaps the only



other woman he knew whose life was her own . . . and who was not interested in nailing him” (127). Ajax admires Sula’s independence as he believes she is not worried about getting married or similar trifles like most women. Sula also likes Ajax and is curious about him: “It was not the presents that made her wrap him up in her thighs . . . her real pleasure was the fact that he talked to her. They had genuine conversations” (127). She feels she can share her thoughts with him and both admire each other’s wits. Sula misses Nel and longs for someone to talk to that understands her. Their relationship modifies as “Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least a desire for it” (131). Sula’s actions now reflect her growing interest in Ajax, but through a possessive behavior. One day she is waiting for Ajax and “not only was the green ribbon still in her hair, but the bathroom was gleaming, the bed was made and the table set for two” (132). He notices that Sula has changed and he is afraid she will expect him to change too. He is concerned that she will try to take control of his life and, thus, he leaves for Dayton without saying good-bye. Ajax interprets Sula’s conventional behavior as threatening because he does not want to settle down and, although he cares for Sula, he is desperate to escape society’s confinements because he thinks he will be imprisoned. Ajax’s actions may seem drastic and careless as they stray from common representations of ethics of care. Even though he likes Sula and does not act with the intention of hurting her, he wrongly associates loving a woman with entrapment as Sula becomes possessive of him. Actually, they are both affected by the alteration of the ethics of care. Even so, she suffers from his abandonment, as she cannot understand his perspective and he does not explain his feelings. So, once again, Sula manages to keep her feelings to herself, distancing herself even more from any other possible relationship.

This inability or unwillingness to have an emotionally balanced relationship is also present in *A Mercy*. Florens projects her feeling of abandonment by her mother into a desire for the blacksmith. Similar to what happens to Sula, but in a much more intense manner, this love becomes obsessive as Florens cannot live without him: “With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me” (137). Florens becomes so desperate to be loved and cared for by the blacksmith that she forgets about herself. She becomes completely dependent on his love. Her desperation for the blacksmith increases: “There is only you. Nothing outside of you” (37); “I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (70). As she can no longer imagine her life without him, she forgets about herself entirely, longing for a deep unbreakable bond with him and to be the center of his attention. Florens’s unconscious inability to create a healthy relationship with the blacksmith may be seen as a response to her traumatic experience caused by the alteration of the maternal ethics of care, because she feels abandoned and unloved by her mother. She turns her desire to be loved into an extreme possessive love.

Florens is also worried about Malaik who receives attention from the blacksmith, because she wants to be the only one cared for. Malaik is a boy the blacksmith takes in temporarily because the child’s father is working and Florens does not like to see him around when she gets to the blacksmith’s cabin. As Florens and Malaik are left alone because the blacksmith goes to help Rebekka, she starts to associate him with her little brother. She remembers her last encounter with her mother: “Minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy’s hand, my shoes in her pocket” (137). Malaik becomes a projection of her brother, and she transfers her anger to him because he is being protected by the blacksmith, like her brother was by her mother: “He is silent but the hate in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This

cannot happen. This expel can never happen again” (137). Florens is traumatized by having to leave her mother and dreads that she may lose her love again, again being rejected in favor of a boy. As she associates Malaik with her brother she is overwhelmed with anger, fear and the desire to have the blacksmith only to herself. Consequently, a healthy relationship between them becomes unattainable because of her insecurity and obsession.

Another consequence of the alteration of the ethics of care is violence, as illustrated by Florens, who commits acts of violence to other characters Florens’s memories and nightmares are so repetitive that she becomes obsessed and hurts others. Florens uses violence as a response to her desperation. She is overwhelmed when she sees the blacksmith taking such tender care of Malaik: “Now I am seeing a little boy come in holding a corn-husk doll . . . You reach out your forefinger toward him and he takes hold of it. You say this is why I cannot travel with you” (136). She thinks the little boy is going to be with the blacksmith as her brother stayed with her mother and she will be discarded: “Peering around my mother’s dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy” (136). She feels threatened: “I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me” (136). She is afraid that she will be abandoned by the blacksmith and she will be alone again, while the little boy gets to stay, reliving her past experience.

Brison states that “trauma undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present” (41). This confusion between the present and the memories of her past, which become blurred in her mind, enrages Florens and she attacks Malaik. She explains: “That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop . . . He screams then faints” (140). She hurts him because she is desperate to be the blacksmith’s only love, believing there is the risk

of his choosing Malaik instead of her. Told from Florens's perspective, few words are used to describe this scene, implying that the violent act is almost indescribable and that she cannot express all her emotions or actions. When the blacksmith arrives and immediately goes to help Malaik, instead of Florens, she becomes even more desperate. She then attacks the blacksmith with a hammer: "The hammer strikes air many times before it gets to you where it dies in weakens. You wrestle is from me and toss it away" (157). She is so hurt by his choosing to care for the young boy rather than for her that she also tries to hurt him. Florens expresses her locked up anger with her mother and brother for continuing to be together while she was forced to leave. She does not understand that Malaik is just a boy and the blacksmith worries about his vulnerability as he is young and away from his father.

Florens's desire for the blacksmith is set on slippery grounds. She wants him only to herself because of the fear of abandonment and so she makes him her owner: "I am adoring you . . . You alone own me" (141). Florens wants to be with the blacksmith in any possible way because she does not desire to be alone again. As Wyatt explains: "the appropriation of the other to one's own desires, leads to violence" (482). Florens wants to fulfill her desire of having someone love her unconditionally and as she tries to control the blacksmith and who he cares for, it leads only to violence. She is neither able to control her thoughts about her traumatic experience nor her actions in the present. Herman explains that threats may alter one's perception (34) as happens with Florens, who feels powerless and is overtaken by anger and fear. Overwhelmed with emotions, Florens does not realize the seriousness of the violence she is afflicting upon Malaik and the blacksmith. Even so, Florens is not portrayed as violent or dangerous, but as a lost woman suffering the

consequences of the brutalities of slavery which causes the alteration of the ethics of care.

In this context, Florens becomes mentally disoriented because the blacksmith does not want to be with her any longer, calling her a crazy slave girl. In her mind, his acts resemble those of her mother, causing her to lose her mind because of a feeling of general abandonment. Herman explains that trauma can be disorienting and one's emotions and thoughts can fly out of control (60-61). Florens is not able to cope with a second abandonment by a loved one in her life. Her memories and present reality merge as she starts to lose control over herself. As Willard and Scully see Florens arriving back at the farm, they "were slow to recognize her as a living person" (147). She becomes disconnected from reality and is trapped in her thoughts of her traumatic experiences. At the end of the novel, Florens encloses herself in the big house that Jacob had built and, Rebekka had locked, and starts to write on the walls – what she writes is, in fact, what we read. She writes compulsively by intermingling memories and experiences, in an attempt to make sense of her life. Shoshanna Felman argues that madness is the:

Impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation . . . [it] is a request for help . . . [a] help-seeking behavior is itself part of female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioral pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman. (7)

Thus, Florens's madness can be seen as a desperate cry for help and care as she feels abandoned and powerless to face the traumatic events she undergoes. The blacksmith judges her as cruel, but he does not consider Florens's experiences as a

young woman slave. And Florens does not even know how to begin to explain her actions because she is herself lost and confused.

As I have shown, the consequence of the severing of women bonds varies according to each woman character. As the alteration of the ethics of care weakens the bonds of motherhood and sisterhood, the traumatic experiences of the characters significantly affect them. As illustrated in this section, while some characters have nightmares and haunted memories, others are unable to have an emotionally healthy relationship, some turn to violent acts and others become mentally unstable or mad.

In conclusion, this chapter shows that in *Sula* and *A Mercy*, the context of slavery and its aftermath cause an alteration of the ethics of care that weakens women bonds. It is for this reason that the women characters cannot be judged as good or bad; their actions simply reflect the cruelties imposed by the sexist and racist society they live in. Although the circumstances may generate unconventional behaviors, the solidarity felt between the women characters is still important and present in various bonds of motherhood and sisterhood. Nevertheless, most women characters are unable to transcend the context in which they live and are negatively impacted by the breaking of women bonds, haunting them, destroying their relationships, driving them to violence and even insanity.

## Conclusion

Tell us what it is to be a woman so  
that we may know what it is to be a man.  
What moves at the margin . . . To be set  
adrift from the one you knew. What it is to  
live at the edge of towns that cannot bear  
your company.

(Morrison, *Nobel Lecture* 206)

Motherhood and sisterhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy* are crucial for the women characters as they try to overcome various hardships. The novels depict the peculiarities of women bonds in the context of slavery in *A Mercy* and in its aftermath in *Sula*. Although friendship and mother-daughter bonds have many positive consequences in the lives of the characters, alteration in the ethics of care weakens these bonds leading each character to cope differently with their rupture. Thus, in this work I elaborate an analysis of motherhood, sisterhood and the alteration of the ethics of care that take place in both novels.

The relevance of the discussion about motherhood, undertaken in chapter one, can be sustained by Davies's arguments that "motherhood/and/or mothering . . . [are] central and defining tropes in Black female reconstruction" (135). In *A Mercy*, Florens and her mother are analyzed to illustrate mother-daughter bonds in slavery. In turn, in *Sula* the Wright and Peace families show the diversity of mother-daughter

bonds. Equally significant is that motherhood is not limited to biological connections. Henderson's arguments enhance the discussion as she suggests that African Americans tend to have an extended form of family (33) because of the hardships they have to endure. As shown in both novels, black mothers often have to be separated from their children, temporarily or not, and usually have to depend on either neighbors or strangers for help in caring for their children. In *A Mercy* the bond established with othermothers is illustrated through Florens and Lina as they become respectively a daughter and a mother to each other; and through Eva and various characters, in *Sula*, as she comes to represent a mother figure for many characters that live in her pension. It should be noted that mother-daughter bonds, in both novels, affect the women characters' subjectivities, especially the daughters, as they try to understand themselves through their mothers and surrogate mothers.

It is critical to observe that, as discussed in chapter two, sisterhood also shapes the women characters' lives in both novels affecting their subjectivities and helping them forward in the search for empowerment. Hudson-Weems believes that "the idea of sisterhood has been too generalized, popularized, and sensationalized as one of the most vogue colloquialisms today" (70). Although it may be true that the term sisterhood is widely used nowadays, I argue that even though these women bonds may not fit the conventional "genuine sisterhood" (Hudson-Weems 66) configurations, they can be considered bonds of sisterhood because the characters do care for and support each other. I further question if such a genuine sisterhood is even possible, because as analyzed, women bonds appear under different guises, not being reducible to utopian visions of a supposed authenticity.

In *Sula*, Nel and Sula are best friends and their sisterhood bond enables them to shape each other's subjectivities in order to overcome existing difficulties. In *A*



*Mercy*, Rebekka's bonding with other women aboard the ship helps her believe she is important, giving her courage to face the New World and the different lifestyle that looms ahead. In *A Mercy*, sisterhood is not limited to women characters of the same race and ethnicity. This premise is supported by hooks's statement that sisterhood can often include bonds among African American women and women from different races and ethnicities (*Feminisms* 17). This kind of sisterhood bonding is illustrated through the friendship between Florens and Jane, and also between Lina and Rebekka. These women characters come together and, even if temporarily, help each other survive in the wilderness. Thus, friendship is constantly present in both novels and has many positive consequences in the women characters' lives.

I have also analyzed the ethics of care and its implications in a slave holding society and in a post slave holding society, as seen in *A Mercy* and *Sula*, respectively. In my discussion I adopt Held's principles that the ethics of care focuses on "trust among individuals based on one's response to another's need, and in caring acts . . . [that] emphasize the relationships of social bondage and cooperation (15). My arguments revolve around the notion that slavery and its aftermath cause an alteration of the ethics of care that greatly affects the characters.

Although motherhood and sisterhood assist the characters in different aspects, the alteration of ethics of care often weakens these women bonds. Because of this change, the women characters should not be judged simply as good or bad, as they regularly have to resort to unconventional actions to ensure their own survival and that of their loved ones. The characters may still feel solidarity towards each other, but their actions may not necessarily convey this solidarity in the midst of dealing with hardships, mainly the hardships imposed by slavery. For example, Florens's mother, who asks for her daughter be taken away, and Eva, who murders Plum,

cannot be viewed simply as monstrous mothers because they act under limiting reality guided by what they perceive to be the best way out for their children. Similarly, Sula's involvement with Jude is a result of her troubling experience, not lack of love towards Nel. And Lina's statement that Sorrow's baby is dead and her act of quickly putting it in the riverbank are not deliberate actions to hurt Sorrow, but are, instead, the only way she finds to keep the two of them alive without creating even more trouble for two women slaves. Likewise, Rebekka also goes through an alteration of the ethics of care, even though her experience is quite different from the other women characters who suffered the predicaments of slavery. After Rebekka recovers from her illness, she changes significantly, as she is traumatized with all her losses. She starts to view Florens, Sorrow and even Lina simply as her slaves, ignoring whatever connection they once had.

The alteration of the ethics of care has a significant impact on the lives of the women characters as they cannot cope with the severing of their bonds, causing many women characters to suffer the consequences of such change. Haunted memories constantly plague Florens, Nel and Sula. Some characters cannot have an emotionally balanced relationship, as is the case of Florens and Sula. Other characters become mentally disoriented and turn to violent acts, as is the case of Florens. As discussed, the behavior of each woman character depends on her social, cultural and historical context as well as on her personal experiences.

This work shows that *Sula* and *A Mercy* depict motherhood and sisterhood as complex interactions, which cannot be determined by preconceived stereotypes or essentialism. As shown in my discussion of *Sula* and *A Mercy*, the women characters in Morrison's novels are complexly developed and cannot be analyzed through simplistic paradigms. Motherhood and sisterhood are analyzed according to the

specificities of the characters and the context they find themselves in. The importance of women bonds becomes evident because not only are their subjectivities greatly affected by such interactions, but so are their lives. Their alliance is decisive in their struggle to overcome different hardships and the destruction of those bonds leads to a series of setbacks in their lives.

In both novels, there are no unrealistic or utopian views in the women characters' constant fight against victimization. The alteration of the ethics of care changes the dynamics of women bonds and often weakens them as the characters cannot understand each other's actions and experiences. Even if the characters care about each other, their unconventional actions may be wrongly interpreted as a lack of consideration and affection. It is then crucial not to judge the characters because their controversial actions are a result of the alteration of the ethics of care.

In *Sula*, it is worth considering that, in general, the community believes that Shadrack, the first character to be introduced, and Sula are, if not crazy, strange, because they do not act in a socially accepted manner. Both live their lives according to their own beliefs and do not care about what everyone else thinks. Shadrack creates National Suicide Day, hoping that he could control the unexpectedness of death by selecting one day of the year in which killings, suicides or manifestations of the sort could happen. While Shadrack tries to establish an order, Sula challenges order as she is an outlaw breaking society's conventions, acting freely and, thus, becoming a pariah. Even so, Sula has a significant common trait with Shadrack: both try to avoid their own sufferings. On the one hand, Shadrack, on coming back from war and not being able to cope anymore with death's unpredictability, tries to control it with a special holiday so that to die is accepted and expected. Sula, on the other hand, is so hurt by her interpretation of her mother's lack of love and is so defiant of

any social rules that she is determined to distance herself from others, to avoid the possibility of getting hurt. Both are unsuccessful, as he passes away without any warning, as do other characters, and she is left without solid bonds of affection that, contrary to her assumption, still cause pain.

Although characters benefit from women bonds in various ways, both novels are far from having a happy ending, especially in *A Mercy*. In *Sula*, the Bottom community is being destroyed to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, as it becomes a valuable area of the suburbs and, thus, increases its value significantly as the downtown becomes too crowded and hot. In the very end, Sula and Nel realize the importance of their bond, but it is too late, as Sula sees this only after she dies and Nel discovers it many years later, when she is visiting Eva in the retirement home. In this sense, women bonds are portrayed as important, but they cannot withstand the changes in the ethics of care, as Nel grows old feeling lonely, Eva is left in the retirement home, and, Sula dies by herself. No character is held responsible or to blame for the events, as the last sentence of the novel emphasizes that there are “just circles and circles of sorrow” (174).

Similarly, in *A Mercy* women bonds help the characters survive in the wilderness throughout the narrative, but eventually they are dilacerated by the alteration in the ethics of care in the slave holding society. As Rebekka succumbs to its distortions, in the end of the novel, she refuses to view Lina, Sorrow and Florens as women, treating them as savages and slaves. She takes Lina everywhere but forces her to remain outside regardless of the weather; she lashes out at Sorrow because while her children died, she manages to keep her baby girl; and, she puts Florens up for sale. Lina is not the same person either as she becomes distant and silent. And while Florens becomes mentally disoriented with a general feeling of abandonment,

Sorrow is the only character who, despite her struggles to keep her baby alive, becomes stronger and plans her escape. It may be argued that she is able to maintain her courage and sanity because of her daughter, creating a mother-daughter bond that gives her power. Even so, the overall tone of the ending is negative as most women bonds are broken and negatively affect the characters' lives.

In the very last pages, Florens's mother's voice echoes the cry of many black mothers that in slavery were forced to let go of their children. She tries to explain her reasoning and, as she is recalling her past experiences an overwhelming empathy for her suffering, admiration for her courage and, frustration due to the lack of freedom overtakes the reader. From her first imprisonment in Africa, to the journey to Barbados, to her sale to Senhor D'Ortega, to her shipment to his land in the USA, her struggles are evident as she tries to keep her senses. She manages to outlive the unbearable, to speak the unspeakable, crying to her daughter: "Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe" (167), but Florens is too lost in her troubling world to hear her mother, unable to understand her mother's reasons and suffering and too deeply affected by her misinterpretation of her mother's actions.

Despite the troubling endings of the novels, I have argued that in Morrison's *Sula* and *A Mercy*, although the alteration of the ethics of care weakens women bonds, motherhood and sisterhood still help the characters shape their subjectivities, fight against victimization and struggle for empowerment. I believe that my thesis brings relevant contribution to the topics it investigates and adds to the critical studies on Morrison's novels, especially since *Sula* and *A Mercy* have not been analyzed together and, according to these premises. In fact, *A Mercy* has received little critical attention so far and although *Sula* has been the topic of other works, I analyze the narrative through a combination of different perspectives with a focus on

the issues of motherhood, sisterhood, and the alteration of the ethics of care. While comparing and contrasting both novels I suggest that the characters try to find comfort and strength in their women bonds as they try to withstand the various difficulties they encounter throughout their lives.

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