

Motherhood in Context: An Analysis of Edwidge Dancic's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Nelly Gatuti Kamankura¹, Prof. Colomba Muriungi, PhD.²

Department of Humanities, Chuka University Box 109-60400, Chuka, Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600779>

Received: 07 June 2026; Accepted: 12 June 2026; Published: 06 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Women's writings from the Caribbean have gained immense interest in recent years due to the feminist movement which swept across the globe in the last few decades. Within the feminist framework, arose the black feminist strand to address specific experiences and contexts of women in the black world, popularly known as Black feminism. Initially dismissed as the 'political' wing of the movement, black feminism has come to influence how literary discourse is consumed. Literary attention has gradually shifted from looking at how history, economic environment and patriarchy affect women characters, to the study of mother characters in order to understand how their experiences intersect with the contexts they find themselves in. However, there has been little focus on black motherhood especially when dealing with specific contexts, feelings of characters, attitudes and even personal ambitions. This study therefore sought to fill this gap by examining the multiplicity of factors affecting motherhood from a black people's perspective in Edwidge Dancic's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in order to reveal what shapes the experience of motherhood in a black people's context. Concepts of Black feminism as advanced by Kimberle Crenshaw formed a backdrop to analyze literary representation of black motherhood in the text. From the analysis, the study established that black mothers go through physical and emotional pain in their struggle to create a good life for their children and that mother figures referred to as 'othermothers' in the text, assume the important roles of mothers and are also subjects of patriarchy. The study concludes that black mothers resist these oppressive societal structures in their quest for personal identity which allows them to survive in such inconducive and unfriendly environments shaped by patriarchal tendencies.

Keywords: Mother, Black Motherhood, Black Feminism, Context

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous studies on women all over the world focusing on various situations that women have found themselves in, especially in the attempt to find their space in a world that prioritizes the male figure. Existing studies on women in literature have therefore tended to focus on the relationship between women and the system of patriarchy which is defined by elements of gendered exploitation, inequality and alienation on one hand, and women's consciousness on the other. In the Caribbean world there has been wider reference to racial and cultural hybridity drawing from the complex history of the region with the majority of the population drawn from the black race. Literature from the region also tends to have themes addressing 'concerns of aesthetics' as advocated for by WEB Du Bois in the Pan African spirit. These 'concerns' revolve around black consciousness, beauty and the universal spirit of black people anywhere in the world (Gikandi, 2005). Like in most parts of the world, women's writings have been studied under variations of the feminist movement which arose out of the need to advocate for the rights and equal opportunities for women in the world.

The Black feminist movement sought to address the specifics of women in the African continent, and by extension the black world where family stability and cultural respect for women had been sneered off by radical feminists. Black women writers therefore advocate for the role of black women in black nationalism and the multidimensional aspects of the oppression of black women in the United States and other countries, as it seeks to understand the injustices affecting the daily lives of black women. Black feminism also emphasizes intersectionality, that is, the cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination based on race, class and

gender (Collins, 2022). The movement rejected the alienation, racism and sexism that black women were subjected to by organizations such as National Organization for Women (NOW) which focused only on advancing the interests of middle-class white women, thereby ignoring the interests of black women, and most importantly, the unique and diverse experiences of black mothers (Dowe, 2023).

Several attempts have been made to characterize womanism and motherhood in the black world, and so vast scholarship on women, gender and motherhood in the Caribbean has portrayed motherhood in various ways. For instance, in a study on novels by women from transatlantic literary traditions, Mohammed (1998) exposes the role of the patriarchal society in silencing women's accounts of motherhood, and also its failure to honor their lived bodily experiences as women. Studies in the Caribbean have also exposed the relationships between mothers and daughters, and the perception of mothers as colonizers by their daughters and how this has resulted in strained relationships between them (Katie, 2007). In cases where attempts have been made to study motherhood, attention has been directed towards viewpoints of men towards mothers, how mothers describe their motherhood experiences, the role of patriarchy in silencing women's accounts of motherhood as well as on relationships between mothers and their children. For example, Akujobi (2011) explores motherhood in African Literature and Culture in works by female writers so as to understand their perceptions regarding themselves as mothers and how they make sense of their experiences of motherhood. This approach has reinforced patriarchal attitudes in motherhood studies, rather than on contexts that shape black mothers in literature, a gap that this essay seeks to fill.

Guided by Black Feminism theory by Kimberle Crenshaw close textual reading was done, whereby aspects that have direct response to contexts of motherhood were selected from the novel. Examples of such aspects include, the rape by the Macoutes (a heavily feared paramilitary force and secret police under the leadership of dictator Duvalier in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*), virginity testing, the practice of 'othermothering' and resistance by Sophi, just to mention a few. The analysis also shows that race, gender, colonialism, patriarchy and other contexts within slavery intersect to shape the experiences of black mothers.

The discussion begins by looking at previous studies on women in literature in the context of the Caribbean and the ideas of motherhood and then proceeds to examine the context of rape in the novel under study, showing how mothers survive under these traumatizing conditions. The concept of 'othermothers' and the context of patriarchy are also examined, paying attention to how black mothers navigate the trauma caused by the experience of slavery. The discussion therefore exposes contexts that shape Black Motherhood in the text under study and concludes that the idea of being a mother is not uniform but contextual, and that slavery makes motherhood more complicated, demanding that mothers be more committed and resilient.

A brief Note on Women's Writing and the Caribbean Experience

The major concern of literature for, and about women is to categorize and create an area of study for female writers. Riverra (2017) asserts that before the introduction of women's literary history colleges into academia and the renewed efforts of scholars to explore, recover, and preserve the literary tradition, women themselves were often the only champions of themselves, their contemporaries, and their predecessors. This implies that the patriarchal status of the community failed to support female writers. The portrayal of women in medieval English Literature was based on patriarchal notions as observed by Lucas & Ordeniza (2023). Different identities of women can be observed but most of those identities portray women as second-class citizens of society, and women commodification can be found as the central idea of the medieval. Lucas and Ordeniza further argue that the common and positive image of women during this period was that of the 'pure' woman and unmarried. The women were regarded as pure until their wedding night. They also represented the idea of Mother, which was the main role of women.

However, in his review of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*, Taylor (2003) contends that the book paved the way for many women after her to not only publish their works but also to engage in the overall critical discourse surrounding the issue of women in literature. This was a beacon of hope for the female writers as they began active participation in writing, critiquing and production of literary materials. Kelly (1993) observes that,

“women writers of this period were faced with a literary discourse that assigned learned, sublime and controversial genres, public and political themes to men” (p. 17).

This shows that women’s writing often reflected the societal views on what was viewed as men’s rights, such as right to education, politics and even the right to engage in various debates that were considered as controversial to the community. Jacobus (2012) contends that the second wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s sparked a resurgence in forging a place for the works of women. Colleges began offering courses in women’s history and literature, and in recent years, a greater emphasis on intersectionality has encouraged exploration into the relationship between race, gender, religion and class to even further prove the importance of acknowledging the marginalized groups in literature. Uppu (2022) also observes that the evolution of the female presence in the arts has advanced over centuries and has become a symbol of change during the newer times, representing the shift in the way women are described to the world and as well as the attention and respect given to women writers that continue making history through their words. Further, Uppu argues that in the patriarchal Elizabethan era for instance, women were portrayed as the weaker sex and they were also brought out as voiceless characters. This notion of the weaker sex has greatly changed and women literature has been recognized and even male critics have begun paying attention to literary works by women, and as a result, the presence of literature by women has been felt around the globe.

Through their narratives, Caribbean women writers challenge dominant narratives, assert their agency and illuminate the diverse experiences and struggles of women in the Caribbean and beyond. Mohammed, (2017) explores a significant anthology that brings together a diverse range of essays from Caribbean feminists, scholars, and activists. The collection serves as a platform for exploring various issues related to gender, sexuality, and power within Caribbean societies, including their representations in literature and other forms of cultural production.

Caribbean women's writings are deeply rooted in the intricate sociocultural contexts of the region, reflecting historical legacies, cultural traditions, and contemporary struggles. Hansford (2022) observes that:

African background and indigenous customs, which echo throughout the Caribbean narratives, serve as inspiration for Caribbean women writers. Narratives that discuss the intricacies of cultural hybridity and the diaspora are infused with a spirit that is fostered by attributes like persistence and creativity, which are pulled from the core of Caribbean women” (p. 14).

This paper adds to Hansford’s work on Caribbean literature by focusing on specific mother characters and contexts that shape them therefore contributing to the repertoire of literature from this region.

The literary works of Caribbean women are deeply connected with the region's rich cultural legacy, complex past, and ongoing struggles for representation, self-identification, and self-definition. Reeser (2023) studies Caribbean women providing a multidimensional exploration of Caribbean women's experiences, identities, and literary contributions and he creates a significant scholarly endeavor that offers a comprehensive examination of Caribbean women's lives and writings from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including literature, history, sociology, and cultural studies.

Caribbean women’s writings can also be read as catalysts for social change. For instance, Nixon (2021) reveals how Caribbean women writers used their narratives as tools for unmasking and confronting violence, shedding light on the underlying causes, consequences; and manifestations of violence. Angelique (2022) delves into the works of Caribbean female authors, analyzing how they confront and challenge dominant narratives while advocating for social change within the complex framework of postcolonial Caribbean societies. Through their literary interventions, these authors not only bear witness to the violence and injustices faced by Caribbean women but also inspire readers to engage critically with power structures, challenge systemic inequalities, and work towards building more inclusive and equitable societies. These scholars also expose the challenges faced by Caribbean female authors and their attempts to promote peace through unity. While these scholars reveal challenges that women face in the Caribbean, there is a missing strand of criticism on women’s experiences on motherhood, that is, the link between experiences of black women or mothers and slavery in the Caribbean,

which helps us to understand intersectionality between gender, race and class, thus exposing black women's roles in shaping their society. Examining the representation of black mothers in this essay helps to fill this gap.

The experiences of women in Caribbean literature are richly depicted, capturing the diverse and multifaceted realities of their lives within the region's complex socio-cultural landscape. These experiences are often marked by challenges, triumphs, and resilience, shaped by historical legacies, cultural traditions, and contemporary struggles for liberation and empowerment. Opara & Ryan (2024) argues:

Caribbean women have been subjected to various forms of oppression and exploitation, including slavery, identity, and colonial rule. Their narratives often bear witness to the profound impact of these injustices on their lives, families, and communities, shedding light on the enduring legacies of trauma, displacement, and cultural dislocation (p. 11).

One of the indicators of trauma and injustice implied in the above quotation is the idea of being black and a mother that this essay concentrates on as these conditions make the woman more vulnerable.

Motherhood: A Crown or a Burden?

Various scholars have come up with definitions of what motherhood entails. Tanjim (2016) observes that scholars have established the notion of motherhood as women's sacred duty, and challenges this assertion as he depicts the image of 'New Woman' as well as 'New Mothers' and how these women are not satisfied with only being a mother. Tanjim explores the aspect of shared motherhood by American mothers and how this creates opportunities for the 'New Mother' to flourish. Tanjim also challenges the notion that women's sexuality vanishes with the experience of motherhood and shows that mothers can get fulfilment by not just being perceived as mothers but also being recognized in other ways in life.

Literary analysis from post colonized states has shown that women have been double oppressed, first by patriarchy, and second by the process of colonization which viewed both men and women as a lower category. Adding the experience of motherhood therefore worsens the situation for the female figure in such societies, especially where slavery is involved as it worsens the experience and burden of motherhood. Bhatt (2023) attempts to unveil the history of black mothers and how their voices have been repressed by the society and argues that, "mothers are tortured by societal and cultural expectations of what motherhood should be and accorded no avenues for self-expression as mothers" (p. 25). The study implies that, although in the past black mothers had no voice, in the contemporary society motherhood has been accorded attention, due to the importance appended on mothers globally. Motherhood is therefore evolving, moving from the margins of literary studies to the centre and this essay furthers studies on motherhood by focusing on black motherhood and what defines the black mother character.

Christopher (2001) argues that *Breath, Eyes, Memory* has several thematic concerns, such as suffering, strength and courage. He further argues that the novel is very artistic because the author is able to put both worlds together to create a masterpiece. Christopher points to the colonialists and how their presence in the Caribbean resulted in traumatic experiences among the women and shifting of the burden of providing for the families to females. Christopher's study exposes the strength and resilience of Haitian women, overlooking the contribution of the mothers in the growth of families within the harsh conditions in the Caribbean, which is the concern for the present study.

Babineu (2014) argues that, "In women's literature throughout the Caribbean, particularly on those works focusing on migration and exile, representations of maternal figures and of mother-daughter relationships have become far more complex and problematized (p. 199). The scholar further conducts a comparative analysis of the writing of Spanish and French speaking Caribbean authors and the influence of mother-daughter relationships on female protagonists-the daughters of the Caribbean diaspora-in their negotiations of a sense of home, and of personal and cultural identity, and argues that this relationship can either support or hinder the protagonist's ability to reconcile the multiple geographic and cultural landscapes that constitute them as migratory objects. Katie (2007) similarly studies motherhood in the Caribbean, through an examination of relationships between mothers and daughters and the challenges they face in the process of growing up. The study presents a scenario

where the Caribbean daughter views her mother as a colonizer and struggles to free herself from her. In her analysis Katie reveals an ongoing strain in the relationships between daughters and mothers in the Caribbean, a situation that creates tension in many Caribbean homes, therefore exposing the need for further studies on the black mother character.

Representation of Motherhood in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Motherhood in the Context of Rape: Dilemma, Love and Hate

The Caribbean family structure has an impact on motherhood as there are several competing factors that shape the experience of motherhood. The family in the Caribbean consists of a mother, father and children, just like any typical nuclear family. The character of Sophi in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is used to expose the trauma and dilemma of motherhood after the father figure dies. Sophi narrates: "...while they were all working together, Ante Atie's father (Sophi's grandfather), stopped to wipe his forehead, leaned forward and died" (p. 10). The death of Sophi's grandfather results in a matrifocal family that is headed by Granma Ife. In this text, slavery and colonization is seen to bring change in the organization of the Caribbean family, therefore forming matrifocal families. The absence of men such as Sophi's grandfather who dies while working in the fields while others are killed by the macoutes such as Dessalines (p. 106) explains this trend. The absence of men in the families presented in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also comes about as a result of rape. The macoutes rape mothers and their daughters resulting to children who do not know their fathers as the rape neither carries commitment, nor do the rapists envisage or care about the results of their acts. Such oppression of women by men results to dysfunctional families that do not have father figures due to the already damaged relationships between men and women. Such rape scenes are revealed by Sophi when she says: "My father might have been a Macoute. He was a stranger who, when my mother was eighteen years old dragged her into the cane fields, pinned her down on the ground" (p. 122). Sophi therefore, like many other children born from rape during slavery, did not know who her father was. Crenshaw (2015) explores how systemic oppressions like colonialism and slavery have historically shaped family structures in the Caribbean, by reshaping motherhood into a communal and adaptive practice and how this has continued to influence the practice of black motherhood. The representation of motherhood in this novel demonstrates the resilience of black mothers in the face of oppression, because despite the suffering that these mothers experience under the oppressive rule of the Macoutes, they remain firm and take care of their families in all ways possible. This points at the unwavering strength of mothers in matters that relate to the welfare of their children, therefore positioning motherhood as demanding that mothers act according to situations they find themselves in, in order to survive the tides of life like those presented in the Caribbean context.

Edwidge Danticat shows that Colonialism has an impact on how Martine perceives herself as a mother to Sophi due to the traumatic experience of rape that she is subjected to by the macoutes who often killed, raped and tormented Haitians during Duvalier's regime. Martine tells Sophi about her attempts to abort her when she was pregnant because she reminds Martine of the terrible rape experience, "drinking all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, verbena and baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you would not go away" (p. 190). Martine's trauma is so intense that when she becomes pregnant for her husband Marc, she even hears the fetus calling her name, "it has a man's voice, so now I know it is not a girl. I am going to get it out of me. I am going to get it out of me, as the stars are my witness" (p. 217). The pain increases until Martine commits suicide by stabbing herself seventeen times. This pain that Martine feels makes her doubtful of her mothering ability. Martine's attempt to do away with the pregnancy is not a sign of maternal failure, but rather an expression of a mother's agency over her body (Collins, 2000). Due to the fact that Martine's pregnancy is as a result of rape, she views her body as a site of colonial and patriarchal oppression rather than a site that is within her control, which represents trauma of forced motherhood.

The experience of motherhood in this context is therefore shown to be crowded with fear. For instance, Watkins (2016) argues that a combination of sexist beliefs engrained in the society, intense censorship during the Duvalier regime, and self-imposed silence out of fear of reprisals account for Haitian women's reluctance or incapacity to speak out against injustice. These assertions by Watkins explains why Martine's trauma remains internalized rather than voiced. Patriarchal and political oppression therefore intersect to cause intense pain to her, leaving violence against herself and at times against Sophi as her only way out. In this case, motherhood no longer

brings the joy that it is expected to bring which presents slavery as a site that subverted the ideals of motherhood. Motherhood comes about, not out of love as in an ordinary family situation, but it comes about from force – rape, which breeds hate and trauma. Becoming a mother from such unexpected situations is what places the character of Martine in a dilemma of whether to keep the baby or not, therefore resulting to a strained relationship between mother and daughter when Sophi is born. The representation of the experiences of Martine as mother in this text therefore positions Caribbean literature as a powerful channel that is used to voice the experiences of black slave mothers from this region.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Edwidge Danticat shows that customs and beliefs strongly rooted in patriarchal norms have shaped the generation that includes Sophi's grandmother Ife. Watkins also notes that various factors intersect to cause pain to mothers in Haiti. Such factors bring about the injustices represented in the novel causing a lot of damage to the families. However, from the narrative, Sophi seeks to break the pattern of trauma in her family for the sake of her daughter Brigitte. This is shown by the symbolic visit to the cane fields where Martine was raped and the act of beating the canes. This can be read as an act of resistance, as advocated by Collins (2022) who observes that black women should struggle to free themselves from intersecting factors of oppression such as slavery and colonialism as they impact motherhood experiences in the Caribbean.

Othermothers in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

In a traditional world order, mothers are often perceived as the female figure who actually gives birth to a child, popularly referred to as biological mothers. In many traditions around the world however, the concept of motherhood has gradually accommodated relationships that do not involve giving birth, for instance adoption or other forms of linkages between people. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat brings out the concept of 'othermothers' referring to mothers who assume roles of the mother figure where biological mothers are not present. For instance, Tante Atie looks after Sophi after her mother relocates to New York and Sophi regards her like a mother, and writes a poem for her every year on mother's day in honor of their mother-daughter relationship. However, aunt Atie tells Sophi that the card belongs to her biological mother, which points to the traditional belief system of motherhood that fixes motherhood to giving birth. James (1989) defines othermothers as:

...those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of childcare for short to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or supportive fictive kin... This concept of other mothering which has its roots in the traditional African worldview and can be traced through the institution of slavery, developed in response to an ever-growing need to share the responsibility of child nurturance (p. 45).

Tante Atie takes on the role of othermother to Sophi Caco and takes her to school, cooks for her and loves her like her own child. She however, reminds Sophi that her biological mother, Martine did not abandon her. Atie plays her motherhood role well and Sophi also loves her, as she does not even know her biological mother in person. From this text, we realize that factors such as slavery and colonialism upset the traditional family structure and creates a new family order in the Caribbean context. As argued earlier, in post colonized societies, motherhood is complicated by patriarchy and colonialism, and this becomes even more complicated in the Caribbean because of the additional aspect of slavery. Crenshaw (2015) explores how systemic oppressions like colonialism and slavery have historically shaped family structures in the Caribbean, by reshaping motherhood into a communal and adaptive practice and how this has continued to influence the practice of black motherhood. The idea of 'othermothers' represents this practice showing that women in slave contexts had to stand in for each other to ensure that their children received basic care even in the absence of their mothers; an absence that was linked to the slave condition. Such acts of standing in for each other demonstrates the resilience of black mothers and their solidarity in the face of difficulties. As Tapscott (2025) observes, 'othermothering' extends motherhood beyond biological relationships by emphasizing on the need for shared responsibility for nurturing children and preserving communal well-being. Brady (2022) also observes that black women mothering practices should be understood not only through the lens of oppression but also through their resilience and capacity to provide alternative systems of care to sustain black families. Thus, the willingness of mothers to care for each other's children demonstrates the unity of black mothers under slavery.

Mothers as Subjects of Patriarchy

Patriarchy has often been viewed as a traditional order where males are seen as the leaders of the society, more often than not, being given privileges that the female does not have. Dancticat portrays mothers as objects of a patriarchal society that expects them to obey cultural practices without questioning their appropriateness. However, in the novel under study, mothers have been brought out as subjects of patriarchy as they take part in oppressing their daughters, which makes them guilty of aiding patriarchy in the society. Lerner (1986) argues that the system of patriarchy can only exist with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history, the dividing of women; one from the other, by defining 'respectability' and 'deviance' according to women's sexual activities (p. 217). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Grandma Ife is represented as being a victim as well as a perpetrator of patriarchy as her actions sink the female gender into a deeper abyss of trauma, subordination and discrimination. Grandma Ife accepts the practice of testing her daughters for sexual purity, and in turn Martine tests Sophi. However, by choosing to follow into her mother's footsteps Martine's act creates a strained relationship between mother and daughter, in that Sophi associates her mother with her oppressor due to the pain she causes her. Through Sophi, we realize Haitian mothers' obsession with sexual purity:

I have heard it compared to a virginity cult; our mother's obsession with keeping us pure and chaste. My mother always listened to the echo of my urine in the toilet, for if it was too loud, it meant that I had been deflowered. I learned very early in life that virgins always take very small steps when they walked. They never did acrobatic splits, never rode horses or bicycles. They always covered themselves well and even if their lives depended on it, never parted with their panties (p. 154).

The word cult has a strong meaning in this context because it is more than an obsession with a particular thing. This obsession is out of the fear that girls will not get men to marry them if they are found to be pregnant or to have had sex before marriage. Since the men in the society expect to marry pure girls, the mothers help them to keep the girls pure for marriage, hence aiding patriarchy. The effect of the virginity test on the relationship between mothers and daughters is felt as it ruins how daughters like Sophi relate with their mothers. Sophi feels that Martine does not love her and that is why she inflicts pain on her. However, Martine carries out the virginity test as a way of protecting her daughter Sophi from getting pregnant while still in school. The younger mothers like Sophi fight for freedom from all the oppressions that she faces in Haiti.

Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994) also explores how moral values are shaped by cultural, social and personal experiences in the novel and how this influences black motherhood. Watkins (2016) contends that Haitian women's hesitance or inability to speak about injustice is as a result of heavy censorship during the Duvalier era, misogynist views ingrained in the culture and self-imposed silence for fear of retribution. As such, Sophi's grandmother Ife is from a generation influenced by traditions and beliefs based heavily on patriarchal values. Therefore, she tests her daughters for sexual purity as this is a way of upholding the moral values in the society and also to prepare them for marriage and eventually for motherhood. During the Duvalier era in Haiti, mothers were subjected to injustices such as rape and often times, the macoutes would rape them in the presence of their daughters. The experience of motherhood as depicted by Dancticat was highly defined by violence and trauma in Duvalier's era.

The process of testing for virginity affects the mothers' sexual lives and they do not enjoy sex as they suffer from psychological and physical trauma. For instance, Sophi Caco struggles with the expectations of the society about what a wife and mother should be. She explains the trauma of the practice of testing, where mothers test their daughters for sexual purity and the daughters test their daughters too. Counihan (2012) asserts that the logic of testing provides a fiction in which mothers exert a degree of sexual agency: by remaining within the boundaries of sexual propriety testing defines, mothers can forestall imminent rape. Thus, Martine views her rape incident as a way of stopping the ongoing testing. This negatively affects the relationship between Martine and her daughter Sophi as she instills pain in her. Motherhood in the Caribbean is an experience that is filled with pain and uncertainty as seen through Martine, Sophi and even Granma Ife. Crenshaw (1991) asserts that oppressions meted on black mothers are unique and should be treated as such. This assertion is evident in the experiences Sophi and Martine go through in their journey of motherhood.

A daughter can either bring shame or pride to her family. In *Breath Eyes, Memory*, Granma Ife tells Sophi: “From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame me, my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me” (p. 156). This shows the seriousness of the aspect of good morals among girls in the Caribbean. Martine also uses Sophi’s chastity as a measure of whether she is a good mother or not. Haitian women have a desire to be accepted in the society and therefore force other women into a state of subjectivity; which runs through generations.

Haitian culture has also incorporated the use of folklore to emphasize on the importance of morality. The stories are narrated from generation to generation to instill fear in girls so they cannot break their virginity until they are of marriageable age:

A story is told of an extremely rich man who married a poor black girl. He had chosen her out of hundreds of pretty girls because she was untouched. For the wedding night, he bought her the whitest sheets and nightgowns. For himself, he bought a can of thick goat milk to drink with a drop of her hymen blood... (p. 155).

This story functions as an ideological mechanism of teaching girls that their value depends on sexual purity. The lengths to which men go to maintain their honor is incomparable to anything else; their selfish attitudes are also evident in the above folklore. The message brought out in the narrative is the voicelessness of mothers in a society that objectifies them and have been given power over their bodies by traditions of the community. With regard to this, Collins (2000) argues that dominant ideologies sustain black women’s oppression by producing cultural images and beliefs that normalize their subordination. That is why mothers are used to aid in maintaining their daughter’s chastity to avoid such tragic incidences.

Martine goes through emotions such as pain due to the incident of rape that she goes through. At times she sees in Sophi the face of her ‘rapist’ and this gives her so much pain such that she has nightmares. Other times, Martine’s love for Sophi supersedes the pain she feels. This is evident in the way she works two jobs in order to educate Sophi and also to provide for her other needs. Often, Martine’s emotions place her in a dilemma on whether to love or hate Sophi. The power of a mother’s love helps her to choose the right direction in that despite her poor relationship with Sophi, she goes looking for her when Joseph informs her that Sophi had left him. Motherhood is about resilience and commitment, and this is evident in Martine and Sophi’s case.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the idea of motherhood in the context of rape and the mothers’ mixed feelings, as they are in a dilemma whether to hate or love the children who are born out of rape. The fact that the children born from rape must still continue living despite the pain mothers feel has been read as representing the complication slavery brought to the idea and practice of motherhood in Haiti in particular and the Caribbean context in general. Patriarchy as a context has also been discussed and how mothers navigate through it in order to be good mothers to their children, while navigating the hurdles it presents. The presence of ‘othermothers’ has also been explored in the context of slavery. The discussion has shown that the role of these mothers was crucial in the experience of slavery, where the biological mothers would easily be separated from their children forcefully due to slave rules or where mothers ran away to save themselves from situations that made their life difficult. Motherhood has therefore been read as calling for varied actions from a mother in the context of slavery. The essay has also analyzed how black mothers are portrayed as subjects of oppression by the patriarchal society, in that they are forced to act according to the demands of a society, regardless of whether they agree with what the society demands of them or not. Such demands present women as having an additional burden of patriarchal demands in addition to slavery, which was equally traumatizing. The analysis has therefore demonstrated that there are various contexts that shape the experiences of Black mothers in the Caribbean and some of the contexts leave the mothers traumatized, while other mothers, like Martine, get into terrible dilemmas that lead them to commit suicide when they cannot bear to live with the pain that life presents. The idea of being a mother can therefore be seen as contextual and the slavery context of the Caribbean makes motherhood more complicated, demanding that mothers be more committed and resilient.

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