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Mothering under Economic Precarity in Terry McMillan's *Mama* (1987)

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Abstract

This study examines mothering under economic precarity in Terry McMillan's novel Mama (1987), focusing on the material and emotional burdens experienced by Mildred Peacock, a working-class Black mother. Although Black motherhood has been extensively studied, less attention has been given to how economic insecurity structures Mildred's everyday mothering practices. Drawing primarily on Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought and, secondarily, on Guy Standing's theory of the precariat, the study uses qualitative close reading and textual analysis. It examines passages concerning employment, food insecurity, care work, welfare, paternal absence, and maternal sacrifice. The analysis shows that Mildred combines paid work, childcare, and household management while receiving inadequate support from her husband. She develops resourceful strategies to sustain her family, but these strategies expose her to debt, physical exhaustion, emotional isolation, psychological depletion, and strained relationships. The article argues that the novel portrays maternal resilience as a response to unequal economic and caregiving burdens rather than as a solution to structural insecurity.

Keywords: Care; Class; Employment; Gender; Motherhood; Precarity; Resilience; Survival

Praktik Keibuan dalam Kerentanan Ekonomi pada Novel *Mama* (1987) karya Terry McMillan

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji praktik keibuan dalam kondisi kerentanan ekonomi pada novel Mama (1987) karya Terry McMillan, dengan menyoroti beban material dan emosional Mildred Peacock, seorang ibu kulit hitam dari kelas pekerja. Meskipun kajian mengenai keibuan perempuan kulit hitam telah berkembang, pengaruh ketidakamanan ekonomi terhadap praktik pengasuhan Mildred sehari-hari masih memerlukan perhatian. Penelitian ini menggunakan pemikiran feminisme kulit hitam Patricia Hill Collins sebagai kerangka utama dan teori prekariat Guy Standing sebagai kerangka pendukung. Melalui metode kualitatif berupa pembacaan mendalam dan analisis tekstual, penelitian menelaah bagian-bagian novel yang berkaitan dengan pekerjaan, kerawanan pangan, kerja pengasuhan, bantuan sosial, ketiadaan dukungan ayah, dan pengorbanan ibu. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Mildred menggabungkan pekerjaan berbayar, pengasuhan anak, dan pengelolaan rumah tangga dengan dukungan suami yang tidak memadai. Untuk mempertahankan keluarganya, ia mengembangkan berbagai strategi yang justru membuatnya menghadapi utang, kelelahan fisik, isolasi emosional, tekanan psikologis, dan hubungan personal yang terganggu. Novel ini menggambarkan ketangguhan ibu sebagai respons terhadap ketimpangan ekonomi dan beban pengasuhan, bukan sebagai penyelesaian atas kerentanan struktural.

Kata kunci: Gender; Keibuan; Kelas; Kelangsungan; Kerentanan; Pekerjaan; Pengasuhan; Resiliensi

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INTRODUCTION

Care, protection, emotional attachment, and responsibility are generally associated with mothering. However, these practices acquire a new meaning when performed under persistent economic insecurity. Many women fulfill maternal responsibilities while facing unstable employment, racial inequality, and limited access to material resources. In these circumstances, providing for children may require continually balancing necessity and sacrifice. Such experiences have been brought to light by African

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American women's literature. It represents brave and combative mothers whose daily lives are influenced not only by personal choices but also by socio-economic conditions. Terry McMillan (1987) explores these circumstances through the protagonist of her novel, Mildred Peacock. She is a Black working-class mother having a hard time raising five children of her own while facing at the same time poverty, insecure employment, no male support, and the demanding tasks of domestic responsibility. Studying this novel reveals how economic vulnerability shapes Mildred's maternal experience and makes visible the often-unrecognized maternal labor she performs to keep her family from collapsing.

The literature on Black motherhood is comprehensive and diverse. It provides essential foundations for analyzing these concerns. Collins (2000) articulates Black mothers' work around survival, protection, and empowerment, while hooks (1984) connects Black women's family experiences to intersecting racial, gendered, and class inequalities. Glenn (1992) traces the historical racialization of reproductive and domestic labor, and Roberts (1997) demonstrates institutional and socioeconomic constraints to which Black women's maternal experiences are subject. In contrast, Stack (1974) examines the survival strategies developed by low-income Black families. In their recent study, Hill et al. (2024) underscore how low-income Black mothers live on limited food and rely on limited resources to protect their children, while Simmons (2021), in the same vein, exposes the survival techniques prevailing within Black maternal experiences. All the above studies have one point in common. They crystallize the relationship between Black motherhood, labor, and socioeconomic vulnerability.

Ellerby (1997), Pawar and Thorat (2018), and Jaber (2024) explore family structures, female identity, and intersecting forms of oppression in McMillan's (1987) Mama. However, their studies do not focus on analyzing how economic precarity shapes Mildred's everyday maternal responsibilities. The present study attempts to address this gap by exploring insecure employment, unequal responsibilities, and the personal cost of maternal survival.

This study adds to existing Black feminist scholarship by demonstrating how economic precarity shapes the day-to-day organization of maternal labor in McMillan's Mama (1987). It reveals how insecure employment, unequal parental responsibility, and material deprivation lead to specific survival strategies and imposes personal costs on Mildred.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the relationship between economic precarity and maternal responsibility. Mildred works hard and tirelessly, taking on different kinds of jobs, but she still cannot achieve stability. Although she cares for her children, responsibility is still distributed unequally. This leads her to develop survival strategies that demand immense personal sacrifice. Thus, the central question can be stated as follows: How does economic precarity shape Mildred's mothering activities, and at what personal cost does she sustain her family? This study examines economic insecurity as a force that directly determines how maternal labor is structured and experienced.

It aims to analyze the underlying material conditions shaping Black motherhood, examine the unequal distribution of maternal and parental responsibility, and identify the survival strategies developed by Mildred.

As for the theoretical framework, two theories have been selected to provide the concepts needed to interpret the problem statement, discuss the findings, and support the study's main claim. The primary framework draws on Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) Black Feminist Thought, which explains how race, gender, and class intersect to shape Black women's experiences. This primary lens is supported by Guy Standing's (2011) theory of precariat. This theory explains how unstable employment, uncertain income, and material insecurity intersect to hinder Mildred's possibilities for action. Poverty means insufficient resources to meet one's basic needs, while economic insecurity refers to uncertainty about financial security; unstable employment describes irregular, temporary, or unreliable work. Standing's (2011)

concept of the precariat describes a social group or category that suffers from insecure employment, unstable income, limited work-related security, and little or no social security. Black Feminist Thought is used as the primary lens because it analyzes how race, gender, and class shape Mildred's maternal experience, while Standing's theory of the precariat offers a complementary framework for exploring how insecure employment and economic insecurity limit her capacity to care for her family. Together, these two theories function as genuine lenses for interpreting the intersecting factors surrounding Black motherhood and the specific economic precarity shaping Black women's everyday survival.

METHODS

This section presents the systematic approach and technique used to collect, analyze, and interpret evidence drawn from primary and secondary sources. The study adopts a qualitative literary approach grounded in close reading of the primary text, Mama (1987). Passages dealing with employment, food security, mothering, care work, childcare, paternal responsibility, welfare, and maternal sacrifice were carefully identified and selected as textual evidence to support the article's main argument. These passages were selected based on their relevance to the research questions, with close attention to recurring descriptions of economic insecurity, maternal responsibilities, and family survival. An inductive method was used to develop themes by identifying recurring patterns across the selected passages and organizing them into logical and analytical axes. The passages were then interpreted through Black Feminist Thought to analyze intersecting racial, gender, and class inequalities, and through Standing's theory of the precariat to examine employment insecurity and economic instability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion of this study develop logically through three interconnected axes: First, economic insecurity and the conditions of Black motherhood highlight the circumstances under which Black mothers have to care for their children. Second, maternal labor and the unequal distribution of responsibility reveal the disproportionate share of the material, domestic and emotional responsibilities borne by Black mothers. Finally, survival strategies and the human cost of maternal sacrifice illustrate the strategies Black mothers develop to protect their children and what it costs them on a personal level.

Economic Insecurity and the Conditions of Black Motherhood

McMillan's Mama (1987) portrays the material conditions under which mothering occurs. In the novel, employment, food, heating, and childcare seem closely interrelated. If one of these is disrupted, it directly affects the others. McMillan (1987) situates Mildred within an African American literary tradition in which some Black women's experiences are closely associated with material struggles. This resonates with Davis's (1981) analysis, who argues that the historical concentration of Black women in poorly rewarded labor is directly connected to this condition. Collins (2000) correlates this vulnerability to the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class underlying Mildred's everyday struggle.

In the novel, this vulnerability is illustrated through an ordinary event that quickly turns into a financial crisis. When Mildred is prevented from reaching her workplace because of bad weather, her household immediately begins to face financial problems as indicated in the passage below:

No one was supposed to leave the house, let alone try to get out of the driveway. Snow was piling up past Mildred's fifth step and there was no way she could go to work in this weather. She was supposed to get paid today and she only had one dollar and sixty-three cents to her name (McMillan, 1987, p. 34).

In this passage, the relationship between employment and deprivation is clear. Mildred's circumstances show that sustained work does not necessarily guarantee long-term economic security. She has only "one dollar and sixty-three cents" left to support her family. This amount is not enough to ensure

decent living conditions for a household with five children. This illustrates that she has no financial reserves and urgently needs money to sustain her family. Standing's (2011) conception of precarious labor is useful here, as it helps explain a situation in which employment exists but fails to guarantee sufficient income. A similar condition appears in Morrison's (1973) Sula, where Eva Peace must sustain her children after being left with extremely limited resources. Ribeiro and Santos (2017) offer a reading of this condition. They argue that Eva's maternal experience challenges clichés about Black motherhood. Like Eva, Mildred does not possess the material security necessary to fully carry out her responsibilities.

This instability to which Mildred is subject can be traced to the type of employment available to her. Her lack of reserves and savings is tightly linked to the poorly paid domestic work, which causes exhaustion rather than economic stability for her family. In the following episode, Mildred is obliged to return to work despite her children's recurring illnesses. McMillan (1987) writes:

It was mostly the kids who'd gotten sick, not her. Bad colds. Mumps. Measles. Then Freda started her period in the middle of her science class and threw up all over the bathroom floor when she got home. Now, Mildred was back out in Huronville on her knees six days a week, cleaning the Hales', Grahams', and Callingtons' houses (p. 26).

She has no choice but to return to work because nobody else was going to buy the medicines for her sick children. There was only one way for her to earn money, which implies being "on her knees six days a week." This phrase shows how hard and tirelessly Mildred has to work to make ends meet, and still ends up socially vulnerable. To sustain her family, Mildred has to maintain other families' homes. This echoes Davis's (1981) argument that African American women have long been concentrated in domestic service, while Graham (1991) demonstrates that domestic and caring labor is articulated around race, class, and gender. This contradiction aligns with Walker's (1982) The Color Purple; in this epistolary novel, women's labor initially operates within strict patriarchal conditions before productive work turns out to be a source of autonomy. Mildred is an extension of that relationship, leading to the conclusion that labor is necessary and indispensable, but it cannot guarantee the protagonist's economic independence.

This poorly paid work has consequences for Mildred, which are visible in her household when she returns home from work. Her children experience economic insecurity because they lack basic necessities. McMillan (1987) writes:

By eight o'clock the house was so cold the kids could see their own breath. They didn't want to leave the sun porch because they were watching 'Get Smart,' one of their favorite shows, but Mildred made them huddle in front of the warm open oven while they ate their beans and rice and corn bread (p. 36).

Here, mothering involves managing the little they have to live on. The oven becomes a source of heat because Mildred cannot afford conventional heating. Collins' (2000) concept of Black women's agency with intersecting pressures aligns with this tension: Mildred is full of imagination, but this inventiveness cannot erase the reality of deprivation. In Morrison's (1973) Sula, Eva Peace's marital decisions are spurred by the urgency of shielding the children from deprivation and offering good living conditions to preserve their dignity. In both situations, it becomes clear that limited resources have a direct influence on maternal competence.

The cold to which the children are subjected highlights the consequences of Mildred's limited income. McMillan (1987) demonstrates that the unequal sharing of parental responsibilities intensifies the family's hardship. Crook, Mildred's husband, fails or is unable to assume his share of the burden in the household, leaving Mildred to struggle alone to provide for the children. She confronted Crook

saying, "Me and the kids sitting in here with the lights and gas cut off and you give me two dollars" (McMillan, 1987, p. 16).

In this statement, Mildred is left to manage her deprivation and its consequences without the support of her husband, Crook. It is relevant to call for Collins' (2000) analysis of gender and class relations here, where she maintains that the consequences of economic hardship are more acute when women have to handle it alone. A similar situation appears in Gloria Naylor's (1982) The Women of Brewster Place, where Mattie Michael, like Mildred, lacks the support of her partner. This representation of mothering demonstrates how the absence of paternal support intensifies and complicates Mildred's responsibilities.

Ribeiro and Santos (2017) identify Mattie as a figure who complicates conventional images of Black motherhood. In this context, two responsibilities fall on Mildred: that of protector and that of provider. These responsibilities should be shared with men. Unfortunately, men appear to be absent, leaving women to deal with all the responsibilities. This situation forces Mildred to be cautious and meticulous about how to use these limited resources. She has to figure out how to stretch these resources so they last as long as possible. The effects of this deprivation can be seen not only in unpaid utility bills but also in the daily act of feeding her children. McMillan (1987) writes: "She put on a pot of pinto beans. Mildred knew the kids were tired of them, and so was she, but at least they would last a few days" (p. 34).

Here, Mildred uses beans to turn meal preparation into an economic calculation. The family must set aside their preferences and value duration (how long the food can last). Hill et al.'s (2024) study on food provision among low-income Black mothers is significant in this context. It underscores the strategies developed by Mildred to shield her children from hunger. What matters to her is not her children's dissatisfaction, but rather the availability of food. Mildred's experience shows how mothering, when performed under deprivation, requires sacrifices and continuous calculation of quantity, cost, and endurance.

Mildred's strict and careful management of household resources is not enough to protect her family from circumstances that can disrupt her ability to earn. The family's survival rests on her labor, so when she and her children are ill, illness becomes a serious health, caregiving, and employment crisis as illustrated by the following passage:

The kids stayed home from school the entire week, and Mildred didn't go to work. She was sick, too. Christmas was three weeks away and two of the families she cleaned for called to tell her they were letting her go. They were mailing her checks, along with a small Christmas bonus (McMillan, 1987, p. 37).

This passage highlights a central paradox. Mildred is obliged to provide materially for the children, yet taking care of them physically prevents her from going to work. Standing's (2011) analysis of precarious employment aligns with Mildred's experience, who has very few resources to cope with family emergencies.

The accumulation of these kinds of experiences helps understand why Mildred does not perceive her difficulties merely as personal misfortune. Racial economic inequality helps better explain the instability of her employment work, recurring shortages, and difficulties in maintaining the household. She vividly exposes this situation asserting: "White folks own every damn thang 'cause they was here first and took it all. They don't like to see niggahs getting ahead and when they feel like it, they can stop you and make it just that much harder" (McMillan, 1987, p. 29)

In this passage, Mildred comes to understand that resources and opportunities are unequally distributed. Her understanding echoes Davis's (1981) account of the marginalization of Black women and Collins's (2000) analysis of race, gender, and class as interwoven forces.

Therefore, economic marginalization directly influences Mildred's mothering tasks. Stack (1974) sheds light on adaptive practices and strategies developed under persistent hardship. Far from romanticizing Mildred's resourcefulness, McMillan demonstrates that survival cannot erase deprivation; it reveals how hard one must struggle to live through it. In sum, Mama (1987) depicts how Mildred's mothering is directly affected by insecure employment, unstable resources, unequal parental responsibility, and racialized economic constraints.

Maternal Labor and the Unequal Distribution of Responsibility

In Mama (1987), the conditions of mothering are determined by economic insecurity, and its consequences are intensified by the unequal distribution of labor performed by Mildred to keep her family running. Mildred is obliged to combine paid work with the daily responsibilities of mothering. Thus, earning takes the form of maternal work. She bears multiple responsibilities combining wage-winner, caregiver, household manager, and emotional provider when Crook decides to come over intermittently. This situation echoes Glenn's (1992) analysis of the racialized and gendered organization of reproductive labor. In her work, she argues that caring and household work have been historically assigned unequal social and economic value. Collins (2000) situates Black women's experiences of work and family within structural systems in which productive and reproductive responsibilities frequently overlap.

This overlap is particularly blatant when Mildred reminisces the time when she had to work tirelessly during pregnancy. In the following episode, she engaged in a heated discussion with Crook, observed:

And who was the one got corns and bunions from carrying plates of ribs and fried chicken back and forth at the Shingle when I was five months pregnant, while you hung off the back of a city garbage truck half drunk, waving at people like you were the president or the head of some parade (McMillan, 1987, pp. 15-16).

From this passage, it is clear that pregnancy does not prevent Mildred from productive labor. Reproductive and income-generating work is performed by Mildred alone, while her so-called husband Crook, "hangs off" and "parades" merrily and without a care in the world as if he were the "president". This carefree and irresponsible attitude of Crook shows how unequally family responsibility is distributed confirming Glenn's (1992) analysis of racialized reproductive labor. Similarly, Duffy (2005) makes it clear that care and reproductive labor become meaningful when gender is scrutinized together with race and class. Mildred's experience dramatizes this inequality. She is bound to perform her productive labor while pregnant.

The strenuous effort Mildred makes to earn money does not merely supplement household income. It helps finance her basic existence. She spits out this truth to Crook, asserting, "I pay all the bills around here, even this house note. I'm the one who scrubbed white folks' floors in St. Clemens and Huronville and way up there on Strawberry Lane to buy it" (McMillan, 1987, p. 15).

Mildred repeats "I" twice to draw attention to the fact that she is the main provider of the household. She is the one who pays, works, and provides. She is not limited to childcare, but also deals with the economic maintenance of the household. There is a racial dimension worth examining: Mildred works in a white household to finance the Peacock home. This tension is closely examined by Glenn (1992), who argues that women of color have historically been positioned as providers of reproductive labor not only for more privileged families but also for themselves. Roberts (1997) goes a step further showing that Black women's reproductive experiences are tightly linked to racial and economic structures, which determine whose caregiving is valued and whose labor is exploited.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that providing shelter for her children is not enough. Mildred's maternal labor involves preserving childhood rituals and doing her best to protect the children from the consequences of poverty. When Christmas draws close, this invisible part of parents' responsibilities becomes apparent. McMillan (1987) depicts:

For the past nine Christmases Mildred had had to hustle to buy Chatty Cathy dolls, Roll-a-Strollers, ice skates, racing car sets, sleds, and bicycles. Crook had helped her sneak them through the side door at midnight. She didn't know how she would manage this year (McMillan, 1987, p. 17).

While Mildred "hustle[s] to buy" the gifts, Crook merely helps carry them inside, revealing his failure to assume full responsibility and help his wife care and provide for the children. This discrepancy is further explained by MacDonald's (1998) concept of less visible work surrounding motherhood. Mildred is clearly anxious about "how she would manage this," which indicates that Christmas itself has become another burden she must solve. This is why hooks (1984) vividly posits that discussions of family must account for class because material resources deeply shape women's capacity to fulfill socially assigned caring roles.

As these responsibilities and caring roles accumulate and rely heavily and solely on her, Mildred claims ownership over her children both practically and biologically. This thought occurred to her because Crook's irresponsibility reaches its peak leading her to declare angrily, "These ain't your damn kids. They mine. Maybe they got your blood, but they mine" (McMillan, 1987, p. 16).

This passage suggests that biological ties are not enough to call children yours. Parenthood requires more than blood. It acquires its full substance only when parents perform the daily labor of caring, providing, and protecting. This is what Mildred genuinely does. Collins' (2000) concept of Black Motherhood is evident here, for it defines motherhood as active work of protection, provision, discipline, and survival rather than biological status alone.

However, claiming the children does not necessarily mean that she accepts or desires paternal absence. In contrast, Crook has made many promises that he has failed to fulfill. Mildred hopes he will make an exception and at least keep his word for the sake of his children. Unfortunately, this hope quickly turned into despair. Mildred cries out in protest: "You promised me, promised me, that when you got back on your feet you would take care of me and the kids like a husband is supposed to do" (McMillan, 1987, p. 17).

This passage is emotionally charged. Mildred's deep disappointment is evident, as illustrated by the repetition of "promised me." She simply requires Crook to participate as a responsible man in the management of the household. She does not demand luxury, only that he shares the responsibilities with her. That is all she wants, not more. This reality echoes Standing's (2011) concept of insecurity, arguing that unreliable paternal support sharpens the insecurity already triggered by precarious employment. Therefore, economic vulnerability affects Mildred both inside and outside the household.

The Peacock family is not literally isolated from male assistance even if Crook does not provide his help. Percy, one of Mildred's suitors, is quite different from Crook. As Mildred's account indicates: "It was Percy who made sure Mildred was warm, who bought her cigarettes, aspirin and vitamins, lard and potatoes, and even paid her light and gas bills when Crook had done something else with the money, but pleaded amnesia" (McMillan, 1987, p. 7).

In this excerpt, Percy's help consists of ordinary acts of material care: warmth, food, medicine, and utilities that are essential to Mildred. These responsibilities, instead of being shared by Crook, fall largely on Mildred. Roberts (1997) makes it clear that Black mothers' extraordinary responsibilities should not be considered as evidence that they naturally need less support.

In summary, maternal labor in Mama (1987) appears to be cumulative. Although pregnant, Mildred struggles alone to finance the home, pay utility bills, buy Christmas presents for the children, cater to their daily needs, and compensate for the chronic absence of the children's father. While Duffy (2005) and Macdonald (1998) reveal why much of the labor sustaining family life remains socially invisible, McMillan's (1987) Mama makes that labor plainly visible. In the novel, everything revolves around Mildred because she is the center of gravity for the Peacock family. She bears a disproportionate share of her family's responsibilities. In Mama (1987), mothering is represented as an unequal economy of responsibility. The labor necessary for family survival has been disproportionately transferred to the mother, and revealing the demands placed on maternal resilience

Survival Strategies and the Human Cost of Maternal Sacrifice

The argument of this paper is as follows: economic insecurity defines the conditions of Mildred's motherhood and unequal responsibility intensifies the labor she must perform. To survive, Mildred must develop strategies to sustain the family despite these pressures. However, this survival has a cost. Mildred resorts to various strategies: she works, borrows, accepts welfare, sleeps with men, economizes even if it is not possible, and sacrifices her own needs for the benefit of her children. Mildred gives a complex image of a resilient Black woman. Throughout her life, she struggles to make ends meet but fails to achieve financial stability. This tension resonates with Ann Petry's (1946) The Street, where Lutie Johnson's determination to provide for her son is profoundly shaped by economic and gendered structures. In both The Street (1946) and Mama (1987), maternal survival is vital and decisive, but that agency is subject to restricted possibilities.

Mildred's resilience is described as a contradictory response to structural oppression: her commitment and combative attitude allow her to keep her family together. However, this situation also exposes how economic insecurity and unequal parental responsibility transfer the burden of social and institutional failures onto women. This study does not seek to celebrate her endurance as an asset but examines how survival strategies preserve her family.

This continuous struggle is captured by McMillan (1987) through the image of repetitive labor. Mildred's financial situation does not improve despite welfare and occasional employment. McMillan (1987) puts it in these words:

Everything was piling up and it was as if Mildred were caught in a snow storm and was constantly shoveling the sidewalk. It kept snowing over where she had just shoveled. In spite of the welfare checks and the occasional day work she managed to get on the side, Mildred was getting deeper and deeper in debt (p. 49).

The metaphor employed by McMillan (1987) is incisive and bears a clear message. It transforms survival into work without progress. Mildred is constantly "shoveling" but every achievement she makes is automatically suppressed by another difficulty. Standing (2011) captures this in his concept of precarity, arguing that unstable employment and dependence on welfare can provide temporary relief but never sustainable security. Through the character of Lutie, Petry (1946) offers a comparable contradiction. Lutie strongly believes that hard work and self-reliance are the keys to success or the American dream. Unfortunately, she encounters structural barriers that make her realize what it means to be a Black mother. Lutie and Mildred's strenuous and continuous efforts do not lead to progress.

As Mildred starts collapsing under debt, she no longer relies on employment and welfare. She resorts to intimate relationships with men to mitigate the effects of insufficient resources. So, she carefully chooses a partner who can be economically useful to her. After Spooky has taken advantage of her, he left her and returns to his wife. This is how Mildred decided to marry Rufus despite his ugliness and the

aversion her children have for him. What matters for her now is not the physical appearance but rather the economic capacity of Rufus. McMillan (1987) notes:

He may be stupid, and he may stink sometimes, but he ain't ugly and he treats me nice and keeps some money in his pocket at all times. He can help me pay these bills. It takes oil to heat up this house, and who you think been giving me y'all lunch money all these months (p. 71)?

This passage brings affection and economic necessity into conflict, as Mildred values bills, heating and lunch money more than romantic fulfilment. Rich (1976), in his work, makes a clear distinction between women's experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood, which helps explain this situation. Mothers are so preoccupied with continuously ensuring their children's welfare that there is no room for personal desire.

To ensure that her children do not lack essential resources, Mildred has no choice but to deprive herself. This deprivation is evident in the following passage:

All I do is thank about what's gon' be here for the kids to eat tomorrow. What y'all need. How much I gotta hustle and work my knuckles loose for y'all. I ain't spent an ounce of energy or ten damn dollars on Mildred since I don't know when. And who worries about Mildred? Huh? Nobody (McMillan, 1987, p. 85)!

This passage makes it clear that Mildred cares about her children's welfare. She puts them first and is ready to do anything to ensure that they have enough food. This is possible only if she "hustle[s]" and "work[s] her "knuckles loose". Ruddick's (1989) analysis of maternal practice is relevant here because mothering involves sustained work aimed at children's preservation, growth, and social development.

Mildred does not only suffer from emotional exhaustion but also from physical depletion caused by years of labor, which have left visible traces on her body. The price she paid for survival is visible on her hands. McMillan (1987) writes: "She looked down at her puffy hands and saw how years of bleach and ammonia and detergent had made her skin like spiderwebs. Ain't nothing gon' ever change unless I make it change, she thought" (p. 50).

Her "puffy hands" tell a long and sad story of her experiences. Her body bears the scars of years of drudgery in white neighborhoods. However, these oppressive conditions raise her consciousness: she realizes that endurance alone cannot transform her circumstances. Her experience aligns with the survival tradition portrayed in Maya Angelou's (1969) autobiographical writing, where Black women are condemned to negotiate labor, motherhood, racism, and vulnerability without being reduced to passive victims. Mildred concludes that survival must involve caring for oneself rather than merely sacrificing oneself for others.

This realization does not save Mildred. She quickly moves from determination to the frustration created by labor that does not guarantee upward mobility. Mildred puts it: "Working and scrimping and scraping, to get where? Nowhere. Not even past the starting line. She went to the sink and turned on the faucet though there were no dirty dishes in the basin" (McMillan, 1987, p. 50).

Mildred's "scrimping and scraping" takes her nowhere and exposes her vulnerability. The phrase "not even the starting line" reveals that she has a long way to go, despite all her labor, she has made no progress. Her automatic movement to the sink, despite the absence of dirty dishes, signals how repetitive labor has transformed her into an automaton. In The Street (1946), Petry offers the same parallel through Lutie, who works persistently, but this work does not guarantee upward mobility because of the intersecting forces of race, gender, and poverty.

Throughout the novel, McMillan (1987) deconstructs a romanticized interpretation of maternal sacrifice. Mildred survives through welfare, unstable employment, unsavory relationships, continuous economizing, and the sacrifice of her personal needs. She is resourceful, but this resourcefulness has a

price: debt, puffed hands, compromised intimacy, emotional isolation, psychological depletion. Mildred resorts to strategies in order to keep her children fed, clothed, warm, and moving forward, but each strategy has its price. In Mama (1987), McMillan does not simply ask whether a Black mother can live through economic insecurity, but what price she must pay to make her children survive this precarious condition.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study was to examine how economic precarity shapes mothering in Terry McMillan's (1987) Mama, emphasizing Mildred's efforts to provide for her children under insecure employment, limited resources, and unequal parental responsibility. The central problem we set out to address was the extent to which economic insecurity reorganizes Mildred's responsibilities. This study explores what Mildred does to protect and preserve the dignity of her family and what this responsibility costs her materially, physically, and emotionally.

Three major findings emerged from this study. First, economic insecurity deeply affects every aspect of Mildred's maternal experience. Unstable employment, limited resources, unpaid bills, illness, and debt are clear textual indications that paid work does not necessarily mean economic security. Second, the unequal distribution of responsibility intensifies these difficulties. Mildred is obliged, despite her pregnancy, to work to pay the bills, finance the family home, provide food and clothing, and compensate for chronic paternal absence. Thus, maternal care and economic labor are inextricably linked. Finally, Mildred resorts to various strategies, notably intermittent work, welfare, economizing, and unsavory relationships with men. These strategies help sustain the family while having terrible consequences for her, including her puffed hands, increasing debt, compromised intimate relationships, emotional exhaustion, psychological depletion. Mama does not romanticize maternal resilience: Mildred's ability to endure these challenging conditions does not make them acceptable or normal.

Given that this study focuses exclusively on Terry McMillan's Mama (1987), its findings relate to the literary representation of Black motherhood under economic precarity and cannot be generalized as empirical evidence of Black mothers' experiences as a whole.

Further research could extend this study by comparatively analyzing characters in Toni Morrison's (1973) Sula, Gloria Naylor's (1982) The Women of Brewster Place, Ann Petry's (1946) The Street, and Alice Walker's (1982) The Color Purple.

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