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Rilley Kaye McKenna

Brigham Young University - Provo, [byucriterion@gmail.com](mailto:byucriterion@gmail.com)

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# empowered motherhood in tracy k. smith's *ordinary light*

*Rilley Kaye McKenna*

In 1955, Mamie Till Bradley, mother of Emmett Till, “claimed the public role of grieving mother and thus reformulated conceptions of . . . African American motherhood” (Feldstein 266). By seeking justice, refusing to be silenced, and having an open casket funeral for her slain son, Bradley refused to conform to societal expectations as a black mother, instead showing the world her humanity. Since the time they were enslaved, black mothers in America have endured the burdens of stereotype and misconception. In addition to the challenging nature of raising their children, black mothers are also faced with overcoming a host of harmful stereotypes that attempt to erase their identity and lump them into one homogenous category. Despite emancipation and gaining “freedom” in 1865, black mothers today remain constrained by unique challenges—racism, discrimination, and economic inequality—in their efforts to raise resilient, productive, and optimistic children who are prepared for what they will face in a world that tells them their lives do not matter.

Representations of black mothers found in contemporary literature illustrate the complexity and diversity of experience for black mothers in America,

and the ways in which black mothers seek to empower their children, as well as recognize their own power and strength. This is especially evident throughout Tracy K. Smith's depiction of her mother and her perspective as a mother in her memoir *Ordinary Light*. By examining what empowered black motherhood looks like in Smith's life, we come to better understand how depictions of empowered motherhood can change the stereotypes and ideas about black mothers in America today.

Negative stereotypes about black women, and especially black mothers, have played a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of who black mothers are. These stereotypes, such as that of the "welfare queen," referring to women (especially black women) who irresponsibly take advantage of welfare services because of their status as mothers, and the "strong black woman," which refers to women who are so independent that they are "portrayed as adversarial, confrontational, unattractive and unlovable" (Cole), influence the lives of black mothers negatively, compounding the difficulties they face while raising their children. Depictions of black motherhood such as Smith's, which admit to both strength and weakness, fight against these stereotypes while also challenging the idea that black women must be perfect to be considered "good mothers." Smith writes of her mother with honesty, resisting the urge to "protect . . . the idea of [her] mother" (6) by only speaking well of her. Instead, she is "searching" (347) to depict her mother as honestly as she can given her "own incomplete vantage point" (346). Such narrative provides a portrayal that emphasizes, above all, her mother's humanity, in direct contrast with such dehumanizing stereotypes about black mothers.

Speaking of the difficulty inherent to being a black mother in America, author Tope Fadiran Charlton proclaims:

Part of my struggle is to challenge the notion that good motherhood cannot exist in bodies like mine. But I can tell you something I want even more . . . [something] better than being acknowledged as a Good Mother: to be seen as a mother and fully human at once. This is liberation. (184)

Charlton begins by acknowledging a struggle that she faces as a black woman: the struggle to be considered a "good mother." But she moves past that, speaking of her deeper yearning for a world in which black mothers are considered valid and human, allowed to make mistakes and still be seen as worthy. Her declaration that liberation is found when black women mothers

can be viewed as both mother and human, or “fully human,” highlights the work that Smith performs in her memoir.

Tracy K. Smith’s memoir records both her and her mother’s stories, taking up the charge made by Michele Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*: “Whereas then I spoke of black women making history and being written about, I now think it is more important that black women ‘write’ their own histories, since the power to write one’s own history is what making history appears to be all about” (xxi). The power to write one’s own history, argues Wallace, is the act of making history; Smith recognizes and wields this power as she writes about her own mother, and chooses to write in such a way that she reveals her mother as “mother, and fully human at once” (Charlton 184). In Smith’s memoir, it is clear that her relationship with her mother is complex and multifaceted. The honesty with which she reflects upon her mother—as heroic yet imperfectly human—brilliantly demonstrates the empowering pictures of black mothers that are emerging in the work of many female black authors, artists, bloggers, musicians, and poets. Smith does far more than simply refute the stereotype of the “welfare queen”; she brings to life her powerful, strong, yet flawed and beautifully human mother, a woman who combats the difficulties of being black in America and of raising black children in America by overcoming challenges with quiet strength and imperfect dignity, even while succumbing to the cancer that wracked her body. Smith’s memoir captures not only her relationship with her mother, but Smith’s own growth. This progression occurs over time, as she goes from seeing the home her mother creates as “the only heaven [she] needed to believe in” (125) to recognizing that, perhaps, the world and the hereafter might be “larger than [her mother] had known to imagine it” (323). Smith transitions from seeing her mother as all-knowing and superhuman to seeing her mother as an imperfect, complex human being. Smith recognizes that although her mother is flawed, this makes her no less “worthy of our attention” (287).

If we are to fully comprehend the revolutionary nature of Smith’s memoir, we must begin by understanding the ways in which black motherhood has been historically undermined and stripped of legitimacy. In “‘Us Colored Women Had to Go through a Plenty’: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women,” Thelma Jennings writes of the horrors faced by enslaved women, specifically enslaved mothers. Often, enslaved women were controlled by slaveholders through threats, since these men

could “force them to mate with whomever [they] chose, to reproduce or suffer the consequences, to limit the time spent with their children, and even to sell them and their children” (46). Procreation was forced upon young girls from “the beginning of adolescence” (46), and “after giving birth, most slave mothers usually had to trust the care of their babies to someone else in order to return to the fields. From that time on, the contact they had with their children during the day was limited” (58). Often, mothers were separated from their children, as in a case when “the slave woman herself was sold to Georgia away from her three-month-old baby because the baby’s father was the young master” (64). These interviews reveal the horrific treatment of enslaved mothers and the lack of respect for or recognition of enslaved women’s motherhood as legitimate or equal to that of white women’s motherhood.

Motherhood for enslaved women was a bittersweet experience, as their desire to have a family was often superseded by their desire to protect children from being born into a life of slavery. Motherhood was seen by some enslaved women as a triumph—a way to assert some degree of autonomy, control, and normalcy into their lives (Jennings). By other enslaved women, however, motherhood was seen as a way to be controlled in the future, as threats of harm coming to children or mothers being separated from children were often used to control enslaved mothers (Washington 188).

Although slavery was abolished in 1865, the dehumanizing ideas held by whites about black motherhood did not disappear. Instead of recognizing the role slavery played in destroying black families, white anthropologists, social workers, and healthcare professionals made various claims about the fitness of black mothers based on biased perceptions and little else (Bennett). Representation of poverty in the United States shifted from focusing on white people to focusing on people of color. “In 1964, only twenty-seven percent of the photos accompanying stories about poverty in three of the country’s top weekly news magazines featured black subjects; the following year, it rose to forty-nine percent. By 1967, seventy-two percent of photos accompanying stories about poverty featured black Americans” (Black and Sprague). Black mothers, specifically, were blamed for poverty in the infamous Moynihan report, published during the Civil Rights Era by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Formally titled *The Negro Family: The Case of National Action*, this report claimed that black mothers were contributing to the failure of the black family by their aggressive and controlling nature,

and that the matriarchal structure of the black family brought with it a host of social ills. By casting black mothers in such an unflattering and downright harmful light, white politicians were able to scare voters into supporting their policies. Both the perceptions left behind by these political attacks against black women as well as the policies themselves have since negatively affected black mothers and their families in American society.

In light of such a fraught historical context, Smith's depiction of motherhood is brave. By telling her story and sharing her personal relationship with her mother, she is standing up against years of violent physical oppression, as well as rhetorical and emotional abuse. As writer Brit Bennett stated, "Writing about ordinary black people is actually extraordinary . . . It's absolutely its own form of advocacy" (Alter C1). This "form of advocacy" is valuable because it provides representation that refutes the idea of the "bad black mother" without falling into the trap of creating extraordinary, perfect characters. By including negative and positive traits as she describes her mother, Smith demands readers reexamine their ideas about black motherhood and its legitimacy. She demands readers recognize her mother, specifically, and black mothers more generally, as imperfect, human, strong, and empowering all at once.

Smith credits her mother with making their home into a safe, comfortable space, crafting a place for her children to feel at ease as they prepared to face a world which would treat them as inferior. Reflecting on her childhood, Smith acknowledges the important role her mother played, recognizing:

It was the life she assembled for us . . . a life that would tell us, and the world, if it cared to notice, that we bothered with ourselves, that we understood dignity, that we were worthy of everything that mattered. No matter what the world thought it knew about blacks, no matter what it tried to teach us to believe about ourselves, the home we returned to each night assured us that, no matter who was setting the bar, we could remain certain we measured up. (19)

In this passage, Smith pays homage to the incredible yet often invisible work her mother performed in order to construct a safe space for Smith and her siblings during their formative years. Unlike the stereotypical "welfare queen," Smith's mother sacrificed much, striving to perform great emotional labor on behalf of her children so that they might recognize their worth, even if the world failed to do so. It is this vision of black motherhood—as empowered

enough to focus on empowering the next generation—that has been too often absent from portrayals of black motherhood, and this is revealed in a wonderful way in Smith’s writing.

Although she speaks of her mother’s love, Smith also discusses the distance that develops between them as she attempts to grow into adulthood and leave behind the parts of her mother’s teaching that no longer suit her. She grieves, finding it “impossible . . . to imagine” her mother accepting her choices, and struggling as she watches her mother fight against the life she is choosing to lead (297). As a young adult, Smith recognizes that despite her mother’s best efforts to teach and guide her, Smith must make her own decisions and find her own path. She describes experiencing the “beginning of [her] life as someone other than [her] mother’s child” (277), and recognizes the discomfort this causes for her mother. Smith describes feeling that her mother has become unsure around her, saying that she “looked at me from a different kind of distance, as though I’d gone feral and she was afraid I’d threaten her with my teeth if she got too close” (258). This distance closes slightly as Smith recognizes that, despite her mother’s imperfections, her mother is dedicated to doing what she feels is best for her daughter; but the proximity Smith enjoyed with her mother during her first years of life never fully returns. Smith accepts the necessity of this distance as she meditates on the way her mother, for many years, “filled the space around [Smith] with her calm warmth,” but how “what [Smith] needed was privacy to find out if [she] even had desires of her own and, if [she] did, to figure out what exactly they were” (215). As she grows, Smith must make the trade off between security and freedom, and in so doing, create separation from herself and her mother.

Smith’s perception of her mother changes as she sees her mother, this woman of quiet strength, battling cancer. Her understanding and empathy towards her mother grows as her mother gets sick, and then especially after she has passed away. This experience deepens Smith’s vision of who her mother was. The strength she had previously associated with her mother is tempered in an emotional scene, when Smith first learns of her mother’s cancer diagnosis: “She wanted to be strong. She wanted to stand on faith...but I could tell she was afraid by the way she steadied herself with both hands against the countertop and smiled an almost apologetic smile” (226–27). It is in the scenes that take place after this one, near the very end of the book, in which Smith comes to see her mother as “a mother and fully human at once” (Charlton 184). At the memorial service for her mother, Smith recognizes

how little she really knows about her mother's life outside of her role as a mother, sparking her to ask, "How many more lives would we find, if we only knew how to seek them, within the life we recognized as hers?" (325). Because of the way Smith has structured her book, readers are able to come to see her mother as a "good mother," someone who cares for her children and defies negative stereotypes of black motherhood. Then, later, readers are able to see Smith's mother as "fully human," as the book shows how her role as a black mother shapes, but does not wholly define, her life.

In 2018, black motherhood in America is defined by both progress and a lack of progress, by both rejoicing and mourning. As black women represent themselves as mothers on stage, online, in music, and in writing—as they create representations of black motherhood that are as deep and varied as the women themselves—we begin to see Tope Fadiran Charlton's dream materialize. Black mothers are seen, at least for a moment, as "mother[s] and fully human at once" (184), regardless of poverty level or marital status. This dream is still far off in the distance in reality, but through art, we see what it might look like. As Tracy K. Smith states, "when we tell our stories, we make power" (278). For Smith, telling her own story "is both a prayer for power and the answer to that prayer" (279), suggesting that empowerment for black mothers comes not only from mothering itself, but also from "writ[ing] one's own history" and therefore claiming power (Wallace xxi). By valuing depictions of empowered, imperfect, and honest black motherhood over caricatures and stereotypes, we see the "power" that black women have made for themselves, as mothers and as people. We honor that power by standing back and listening, as they tell us what it really means to be a black mother in America today.

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