



## Intersectionality and Maternal Health in *Kindred*, *A Mercy*, and *The Joy Luck Club*

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### Abstract

This essay explores the intersectionality of maternal health in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. By analyzing these texts through the lens of intersectionality, the study investigates how race, gender, class, and cultural factors influence maternal health experiences and outcomes. *Kindred* offers a poignant depiction of the maternal struggles and traumas faced by African American women across time periods. *A Mercy* delves into the diverse maternal experiences within the context of early American slavery, highlighting the intersections of race, class, and gender. *The Joy Luck Club* presents the complexities of maternal health within the Chinese-American immigrant experience, emphasizing cultural and generational dynamics. Through a comparative analysis, the essay uncovers common themes of trauma, sacrifice, and resilience, while also addressing the unique contexts of each narrative. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating an intersectional perspective in maternal health care, offering insights into contemporary obstetrics and gynaecology practice and policy.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Gender, Health, Intersection, Maternal.

### Introduction

The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, describes how different social identities such as race, gender, class, and culture intersect to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege (Caldwell and Crenshaw 4). This framework is crucial for understanding the complexities of maternal

health, as it reveals how various forms of oppression and social determinants affect the experiences and outcomes of mothers. In obstetrics and gynaecology, intersectionality helps healthcare providers recognize the multifaceted barriers that women from diverse backgrounds face, enabling more comprehensive and equitable care. By

considering the intersecting identities of patients, healthcare professionals can better address the specific needs and challenges that influence maternal health, from access to care to the quality of medical treatment received (Thomas).

Maternal health refers to women's health during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. It encompasses a wide range of factors, including prenatal care, safe delivery practices, postnatal care, and the prevention and treatment of maternal health conditions such as preeclampsia and postpartum depression (Azugbene 11). Maternal health is a critical aspect of obstetrics and gynaecology, as it directly affects both the well-being of mothers and the health outcomes of their infants (Swiet 5). Ensuring comprehensive maternal health care is essential for reducing maternal morbidity and mortality, improving reproductive health, and fostering healthy families and communities. The World Health Organisation and other global health entities reaffirm the importance of access to quality maternal health services as a fundamental human right and a key indicator of a country's overall health status.

The intersectionality framework reveals how overlapping social factors create unique maternal health challenges. For example, African American women face higher maternal mortality rates due to race, socioeconomic status, and limited healthcare access (Lister et al. 15). Similarly, immigrant women often encounter barriers to care related to language, culture, and legal status. Addressing these intersecting factors is crucial for equitable maternal healthcare (Zhu 10).

This paper explores how intersectionality influences the portrayal of maternal health in three significant literary works: *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison, and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. This exploration will contribute to understanding maternal health issues in literary

studies and inform improvements in maternal healthcare practices and policies. Each text offers a unique perspective on maternal health intersectionality. *Kindred* depicts the physical and psychological trauma of enslaved African American women, highlighting race, gender, and systemic oppression. *A Mercy* explores maternal sacrifice and survival among women of different races and social standings in early America. *The Joy Luck Club* examines the impact of culture, gender, and immigration on Chinese American mothers and daughters, revealing generational challenges to maternal well-being. These texts offer a diverse lens on intersectional maternal health. By analyzing characters' experiences, this study will uncover multifaceted dimensions of motherhood, informing both literary studies and obstetrics and gynaecology.

### Kindred

In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the depiction of maternal health is inextricably linked to the brutal realities of slavery, providing a harrowing exploration of how enslaved women navigated pregnancy and motherhood. The protagonist, Dana, is an African American woman from the 1970s who is repeatedly transported back to the antebellum South, where she witnesses first-hand the dehumanizing treatment of enslaved women. The historical context of slavery reveals the severe neglect and abuse those enslaved mothers endured, as their reproductive capacities were exploited for economic gain. This exploitation is starkly depicted through the experiences of characters like Alice, whose repeated rapes and forced pregnancies highlight the systemic violence inflicted upon enslaved women. Through Dana's modern perspective, Butler underscores the historical trauma that continues to influence contemporary understandings of maternal health within marginalized communities. Rufus and Alice's relationship highlights the brutal conditions under which enslaved women lived, focusing on Alice's repeated sexual exploitation and

forced pregnancies by Rufus. The following passage illustrates how enslaved women had no control over their reproductive health:

He thought about that. "Disappeared? You mean like smoke?" Fear crept into his expression. "Like a ghost?" "Like smoke, maybe. But don't go getting the idea that I'm a ghost. There are no ghosts." "That's what Daddy says." "He's right."

"But Mama says she saw one once." I managed to hold back my opinion of that. His mother, after all ... Besides, I was probably her ghost. She had had to find some explanation for my vanishing. I wondered how her more realistic husband had explained it. But that wasn't important. What I cared about now was keeping the boy calm. "You needed help," I told him. "I came to help you. Twice. Does that make me someone to be afraid of?" "I guess not." He gave me a long look, then came over to me, reached out hesitantly, and touched me with a sooty hand. "You see," I said, "I'm as real as you are." He nodded. "I thought you were. All the things you did ... you had to be. And Mama said she touched you too." (Butler 24)

In this passage from *Kindred*, Octavia Butler explores the complexities of maternal discourse through the lens of intersectionality, particularly focusing on how race and gender intersect in the experiences of motherhood. Dana's assertion, in response to being perceived as a ghost, highlights the erasure of Black maternal figures within both historical and contemporary narratives – a phenomenon Kimberle Crenshaw identifies as the marginalization of Black women in intersectional contexts. Crenshaw notes that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account

cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 140).

In this scene, Dana becomes a ghostly figure, not only because of her time travel but also because of the historical erasure of Black motherhood. Rufus's mother's claim to have seen a ghost can be interpreted as a reflection of the way society views Black maternal figures – as spectral presences, whose contributions and sacrifices are often rendered invisible. Dana's role as a surrogate maternal figure to Rufus, stepping in to help him and comfort him, challenges this erasure by asserting the reality and significance of her presence. This interaction emphasizes the intersectional nature of Dana's experience as both a Black woman and a maternal figure, whose identity is shaped by the historical context of slavery and the "societal forces" that attempt to "render her invisible" (Gilliam et al. 8). Through Dana, Butler critiques the historical silencing of Black maternal voices, illustrating how intersectionality complicates and enriches the discourse on motherhood.

### A Mercy

In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, the depiction of maternal health amid early American slavery is multifaceted, revealing the stark differences between the experiences of enslaved women and their mistresses. Florens' mother, in a desperate act of love and protection, chooses to send her daughter away with a stranger, hoping to secure a better future for her. This decision underscores the extreme measures that enslaved mothers had to take to ensure their children's survival, highlighting the cruel dynamics of maternal health and agency under slavery. In contrast, the character of Rebekka, a white mistress, experiences maternal health challenges within a different context. While she faces her own hardships, including miscarriages and the death of her children, her experiences are shaped by her racial and social status. Her racial status affords her a level of care and concern that enslaved women could never hope

to receive: "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter." Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laugh creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking,

God help me if this is not the most wretched business... "There is a priest here," D'Ortega went on. "He can bring her to you. I'll have them board a sloop to any port on the coast you desire." "No. I said, no." Suddenly, the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes. They wrote new papers. Agreeing that the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight, considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance by three hogsheads of tobacco or fifteen English pounds, the latter preferred. The tension lifted, visibly so on D'Ortega's face. Eager to get away and re-nourish his good opinion of himself, Jacob said abrupt goodbyes to Mistress D'Ortega, the two boys, and their father. (Morrison 26, 27)

The mother's attempt to offer herself in place of her daughter underscores the extreme sacrifices that enslaved women were forced to make under the dehumanizing conditions of slavery, where their roles as mothers were subordinated to their value as property. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is crucial here, as it reveals how multiple forms of oppression, racism, sexism, and classism, converge to shape the maternal experiences of enslaved women. Crenshaw argues that "intersectionality is not simply about identities, but about the structures that create and maintain those identities" (Crenshaw 139).

At this moment, the mother's identity as both a woman and a mother is inextricably linked to her position as an enslaved person, where her maternal instincts are manipulated by the economic interests of the enslavers. The woman's terror, which ends Jacob's laughter,

highlights the profound emotional and psychological toll of these intersecting oppressions. The transactional nature of the exchange, with the girl's value calculated in tobacco and pounds, exemplifies how the institution of slavery commodified not only individuals but also maternal relationships. This commodification reflects what Patricia Hill Collins, where Black women's bodies and their roles as mothers were controlled and exploited by dominant power structures. Morrison's portrayal of this scene critiques the erasure of maternal agency under slavery, showing how the intersection of race, gender, and class rendered Black motherhood both visible in its suffering and invisible in its lack of recognition and autonomy. The critical lens reveals the devastating impact of intersecting oppressions on maternal discourse within the context of slavery.

### The Joy Luck Club

In Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, the depiction of maternal health is intricately tied to the cultural context of the Chinese-American immigrant experience. The novel portrays the lives of

Chinese-American mothers and their daughters, illustrating how cultural heritage and the immigrant journey shape their health and well-being. The mothers in the novel carry with them traditional Chinese beliefs and practices regarding health and motherhood, which often clash with their daughters' Americanized perspectives. This cultural tension impacts maternal health as the mothers navigate a new healthcare system and societal expectations in the United States, often feeling disconnected from their cultural roots and misunderstood by their daughters. Tan's narrative highlights how these women strive to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to a new environment, which influences their approaches to maternal health and child-rearing:



I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents' promise. This means nothing to you, because to you, promises mean nothing. A daughter can promise to come to dinner, but if she has a headache, if she has a traffic jam, if she wants to watch a favourite movie on TV, she no longer has a promise. I watched this same movie when you did not come. The American soldier promises to come back and marry the girl. She is crying with a genuine feeling, and he says, "Promise! Promise! Honey-sweetheart, my promise is as good as gold." Then he pushes her onto the bed. But he doesn't come back. His gold is like yours, it is only fourteen carats. To Chinese people, fourteen carats aren't real gold. Feel my bracelets. They must be twenty-four carats, pure inside and out. It's too late to change you, but I'm telling you this because I worry about your baby. I worry that someday she will say, "Thank you, Grandmother, for the gold bracelet. I'll never forget you." But later, she will forget her promise. She will forget she had a grandmother. (Tan 23)

In this passage, Lindo Jong reflects on the cultural differences in the concept of promises and the inherent value placed on them within Chinese versus American contexts. This reflection serves as a critical entry point to explore the intersectionality of culture, gender, and generational differences, particularly within the framework of maternal health and relationships. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality helps to unpack the overlapping identities and social structures that shape the characters' experiences and perceptions.

The mother's reflection on the importance of promises and the symbolic weight of gold illustrates the deep cultural divide between her traditional values and the more individualistic attitudes she perceives in her daughter. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of

intersectionality is relevant here, as it highlights how the intersecting identities of race, gender, and immigrant status influence the maternal role. Crenshaw notes that intersectionality "demands a rethinking of the relationships between identity categories, one that takes into account the diversity and multiplicity of experiences within those categories" (Crenshaw 129). The mother's sacrifice, rooted in a promise made to her own parents, underscores the generational transmission of cultural values and the burdens of filial duty, which are often intensified by the immigrant experience. Her concern that her daughter and future granddaughter may forget these promises reflects the anxiety of cultural erosion and the loss of intergenerational continuity in a new cultural context.

The metaphor of the gold bracelet symbolizes the ideal of unwavering commitment and cultural integrity that the mother fears is being diluted in the American context. This aligns with Patricia Hill Collins' concept of "othermothering," where immigrant women shoulder the responsibility of preserving cultural values across generations while navigating the pressures of assimilation (Collins 15). The mother's dialogue reveals how the intersection of cultural expectations, gender roles, and immigrant identity shapes the maternal experience, creating tensions between the desire to uphold tradition and the challenges of raising daughters in a different cultural landscape. Through this lens, Tan's narrative explores the nuanced dynamics of maternal discourse, where the intersections of identity deeply influence the communication and understanding between mothers and daughters.

From an intersectional perspective, this passage also highlights how cultural expectations intersect with gender roles, impacting maternal experiences and relationships. Lindo's anxiety about her granddaughter forgetting her illustrates the broader issue of "cultural transmission and the preservation of heritage" within immigrant

families (Bamaca et al. 560). This is particularly significant in the context of maternal health, where the well-being of children is typically linked to the cultural and emotional stability provided by maternal figures.

The metaphor of the gold bracelets serves as a powerful symbol of authenticity, purity, and enduring value. Lindo's insistence on the purity of her gold bracelets parallels her desire for her daughter and granddaughter to embrace and uphold the genuine values and commitments of their heritage. This emphasis on authenticity is critical in understanding the intersectional dynamics at play, as it reflects the struggle to maintain "cultural integrity in the face of assimilative pressures" (Berry and Taban 211).

The intersection of culture, gender, and generation plays a critical role in shaping the maternal health experiences of the characters in *The Joy Luck Club*. Cultural expectations regarding gender roles and filial piety profoundly affect mothers and daughters. The mothers, who grew up in pre-revolutionary China, embody traditional views on motherhood, which include a strong emphasis on sacrifice and resilience. These cultural expectations typically place immense pressure on them to fulfill their maternal duties, sometimes at the expense of their own health. In contrast, their daughters, raised in the United States, are influenced by Western ideals of individualism and self-care, leading to generational conflicts and misunderstandings. The daughters tend to struggle to reconcile their mothers' traditional views with their own modern perspectives on gender and health. This generational divide not only impacts their relationships but also their "perceptions of what it means to be a healthy and successful mother" (Halpern and Perry-Jenkins 530).

Mother-daughter relationships are central to *The Joy Luck Club*, profoundly impacting perceptions and experiences of maternal health. The novel's structure, which

alternates between the mothers' and daughters' perspectives, allows for a deep exploration of how these relationships influence their understanding of health and well-being. The mothers' stories are filled with hardships and sacrifices made for the sake of their children, reflecting a traditional view of maternal health that prioritizes the well-being of the family over the individual. Tan's exploration of these relationships underscores the complexities of maternal health within immigrant families, highlighting how cultural, generational, and gendered expectations shape their experiences and health outcomes.

### Comparative Analysis

Across the texts, common themes related to maternal health and intersectionality emerge, particularly trauma, sacrifice, and cultural influences. In *Kindred*, Dana's experiences reflect the traumatic realities of slavery, emphasizing the physical and psychological scars that "enslaved women" endure (Caldwell and Crenshaw 14). Similarly, *A Mercy* portrays the extreme sacrifices made by enslaved mothers, highlighting their resilience and the emotional toll of protecting their children in an oppressive society. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the theme of sacrifice is also prevalent, as Chinese-American mothers navigate the challenges of maintaining their cultural identity while ensuring their daughters' well-being in a new country.

The portrayal of maternal health differs significantly based on the historical and cultural contexts of each text. In *Kindred*, the historical context of slavery in the antebellum South creates a backdrop of extreme violence and dehumanization, where maternal health is directly tied to the control and exploitation of women's bodies. The trauma experienced by enslaved women is depicted through Dana's time travels, revealing the historical roots of "systemic racism and its enduring impact" on "African American" maternal health (Caldwell and Crenshaw 131). *A Mercy*, set in the early

stages of American slavery, explores a nascent but equally brutal system where race, class, and gender intersect to determine the fates of women. The maternal health experiences of characters like Florens and her mother are shaped by the harsh realities of a society that “commodifies” their “bodies and labour” (Gilliam et al. 28). In contrast, *The Joy Luck Club* is situated in the 20th-century immigrant experience, where Chinese-American mothers confront the cultural dissonance between their traditional beliefs and the new societal norms they encounter in the United States.

The intersection of race, gender, class, and culture in these three texts profoundly affects maternal health outcomes and experiences, demonstrating how these intersecting identities create unique challenges and vulnerabilities. In *Kindred*, the intersection of race and gender results in compounded oppression for African American women, where their maternal health is compromised by systemic racism and gender-based violence. *A Mercy* further illustrates how class and race intersect to dictate the maternal choices available to enslaved women, with their health and survival hinging on the mercy of their owners and the rigid social hierarchies of the time. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the intersection of culture and generation shapes the maternal health narratives, as Chinese-American mothers and daughters navigate the pressures of cultural preservation and assimilation. These intersections reveal that maternal health cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed through the lens of multiple, overlapping social identities that influence access to care, health outcomes, and the overall maternal experience. By examining these intersections, the texts collectively underscore the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding and addressing maternal health disparities.

### Conclusion

This research paper has analyzed the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and

culture in relation to maternal health through an examination of *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison, and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. The paper has uncovered how these intersecting identities influence maternal experiences and health outcomes depicted in the selected literary texts.

In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler illustrates the compounded effects of racial and gendered oppression on maternal health through the protagonist Dana. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* provides a critical examination of early American slavery and its impact on maternal health among enslaved women and their mistresses. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* offers insight into the

Chinese-American immigrant experience, focusing on the cultural, generational, and gendered dimensions of maternal health. The analysis across these texts reveals common themes, including trauma, sacrifice, and cultural influences on maternal health, while also highlighting significant differences based on historical and cultural contexts. The intersectionality of race, gender, class, and culture profoundly affects maternal health outcomes and experiences, shaping the narratives of motherhood depicted in the literature.

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