

## Children of Horror in Laura Fish's *Strange Music*

### Los hijos del horror en *Strange Music*, de Laura Fish

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**Abstract:** Laura Fish's *Strange Music* is a novel depicting the lives of three different women who are traumatized and disconnected from their children through the lasting effects of slavery. The slave system as well as the oppressive white patriarchal aftermaths confine Elizabeth, Kaydia, and Sheba in such a way that they are not able to gain motherly guidance and support. As a result, the perspective of all three protagonists towards their children changes dramatically. This article intends to focus on the importance of the motherline, its disconnection, and the consequences with a close analysis of Laura Fish's *Strange Music*.

**Keywords:** neo-slave narrative; motherline; disconnection; black women.

**Summary:** Introduction. The Importance of Motherly Support Reflected in Neo-Slave Narratives. The Trauma of Rape and Black Slavery Literature. Rape and Trauma in *Strange Music*. The Broken Motherline in *Strange Music*. Children of Horror. Objecting to the Oppressive System. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** *Strange Music*, de Laura Fish, es una novela que describe las vidas de tres mujeres diferentes, traumatizadas y desconectadas de sus hijos como consecuencia de los efectos duraderos de la esclavitud. El sistema de esclavitud, así como las secuelas del opresivo patriarcado del hombre blanco, confinan a Elizabeth, Kaydia y Sheba de tal manera que no pueden obtener la orientación y el apoyo materno. Como resultado, la perspectiva que las tres protagonistas tienen hacia sus hijos cambia drásticamente. Este artículo pretende centrarse en la importancia de la línea materna, su desconexión y sus consecuencias a través de un análisis minucioso de *Strange Music*, de Laura Fish.

**Palabras clave:** narrativa neoesclavista; línea materna; desconexión; mujeres negras.

**Sumario:** Introducción. La importancia del apoyo materno reflejada en las narrativas neoesclavistas. El trauma de la violación y la literatura sobre la esclavitud de los negros. Violación y trauma en *Strange Music*. La ruptura de la línea materna en *Strange Music*. Hijos del horror. Oponerse al sistema opresor. Conclusión.

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## INTRODUCTION

Black British women's literary work on the fictional representation of the slave past has been mostly ignored and remains "Britain's 'Heart of Darkness'" (Lima 3). Even works like Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010) or Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008) that have gained popularity are not yet to be found on school reading lists and may only be discussed in specialist courses at British universities. Leila Kamali explains the role of black British narrative in the slave past:

Black British fiction, by filling in the spaces and silences of a dominant British history, rereads hegemonic history with a specific knowingness about what has been left out, in order to flag up a lack of innocence amid a British cultural hegemony that takes pride in claiming to have been instrumental in the abolition of slavery, and trumpets its 'multicultural' status today. (15)

Particularly, black women's neo-slave narratives dwell upon traumatic incidences such as the rape of black women. Rape and racism continued after the abolishment of slavery and "racist myths developed in American culture that labeled African American women as 'rapable' (always sexually available)" (Smith 29). During and after the abolishment of slavery the rape trauma inflicted upon black women and girls was ignored, above all when these women and girls became mothers. Black women authors force their readers to remember by writing about this trauma.

Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008), which can be both categorized as a biofictional as well as a neo-slave narrative, and which deals both with rape trauma and mothering, has been rarely analyzed. Set in England and the West Indies between the years 1837 to 1840, *Strange Music* focuses on the stories of three different women. Elizabeth Barret, a fictionalized Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is an ill poet who stays at Torquay in England, Kaydia is the Creole domestic maidservant who lives on the Barrett estate in Jamaica, and Sheba is a black indentured labourer who also lives on Barrett's plantation. Through the dysfunction of the motherline, a supportive system of black women, the mothers perceive their children as enemies, monsters, and demons.

## 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTHERLY SUPPORT REFLECTED IN NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES

Several studies by black feminists have focused on the mothering systems of black women and on the strategies that black mothers developed during slavery to ensure the survival of their children. Patricia Hill Collins explains that those mothers “make varying choices in negotiating the complicated relationship of preparing children to fit into, yet resist, systems of racial domination” (“Shifting the Centre” 58). Parallel to Collins’ idea, feminist literary criticism has explored black mothering in literature where the mother figures struggle to “engage in a maternal practice that has as its explicit goal the empowerment of children” (O’Reilly 1). The survival of the generation remained, in fact, the main concern in black mothering. Black fictional mothers were trying to help each other. As Collins notes, the power of mothering relies “not only [on]mothering to their own ‘blood’ children, but also to being othermothers to the children in their extended family networks, and those in the community overall” (“Shifting the Centre” 56). This womanly support is also present in numerous neo-slave narratives where female characters reach out to each other in order to protect and nurture the next generations.

Othermothering is one survival mechanism that is commonly found in neo-slave narratives. Othermothers are women who are mothers themselves, or had been mothers to their own children, but take care of children who are not connected to them biologically. While othermothering became an “expected task” for enslaved black women along with their many other duties (Edwards 88), othermothers indirectly counteracted the slave system by providing care and guidance, as well as cultural knowledge to the next generation. As Arlene Edwards notes,

[t]he experience of slavery saw the translation of othermothering to new settings since the care of children was an expected task of enslaved Black women in addition to the field or house duties. . . . The familial instability of slavery engendered the adaptation of communality in the form of fostering children whose parents, particularly mothers, had been sold. This tradition of communality gave rise to the practice of othermothering. The survival of the concept is inherent to the survival of Black people as a whole . . . since it allowed for the provision of care to extended family and nonblood relations. (80)

The concept of othermothering explained by Edwards plays not only a crucial role in the lives of black families, but is also an influential theme in neo-slave narratives. With othermothering, children can get help through the motherline. Ruth Naomi Lowinsky describes the motherline as a bodily sensation:

[I]t is not about abstract genealogical diagrams; it is about bodies being born out of bodies. Envision the line as cord, as a thread, as the yarn emerging from the fingers of a woman at the spinning wheel. Imagine cords of connection tied of generations. Like weaving or knitting, each thread is tied to others to create a complex, richly textured cloth connecting the past to the future. (12)

The connection to the motherline is established when a woman is sharing a story with another woman or female person. There are no written rules and the passing of stories are done orally. The earliest connection of a woman to the motherline is through the mother, women in the family, close friends, and othermothers.

Due to the oppressive conditions in the real and fictional representation of the slave system, the connection between mothers and their children becomes disrupted or does not function. With these disruptions, the protagonists and almost all characters depicted in the neo-slave narratives are traumatized. This means that slavery either breaks and disconnects the motherline by separating mothers from their children or burdens them with the transmission of traumatic incidences. One of the most important dysfunctions of such disruption of motherhood is the changing perspective that mothers experience towards their children. The major cause is the physical and psychological violence upon black women and girls through rape.

## **2. THE TRAUMA OF RAPE AND BLACK SLAVERY LITERATURE**

Like a ghost, the rape trauma of slavery continues to haunt throughout the representations in recent black female literature. Female black writers do not hesitate to depict the wound to the body and psychology of fictional black girls and women through white and black male violators. Mother-daughter relationships, in particular, provide a focus on the aspects of trauma because, as Vickroy observes,

[t]hese intimate relationships bear the effects of social, cultural, and economic mediations more powerfully because of traumatic circumstances. As their identities are formed in these circumstances, daughters feel a conflicted protective fearfulness toward their mothers and dread of reliving their mothers' trauma. (4)

Going a step further, Joy DeGruy articulated her theory of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome and described the significantly different cultural trauma that African women shared during slavery and its aftermath, while enduring both racism and sexism, and how its effects endure in the present. It helps identify ignored traumas, restructures the perception of trauma through individual narratives, and helps to overcome painful memories.

The trauma of slavery, especially on the body, was highlighted by Jennifer Griffiths' work *Trauma Possessions*, where she analyses African American women's literature, presenting how the stories of trauma survivors signify a beginning of their narratives. Many studies dwell upon trauma and mothering in black female literature, such as Manuela Lopez Ramírez in "What You Do to Children Matters: Toxic Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015)," which focuses on the damaging effects of trauma on mothering such as preservation, nurturance and protection. Jill Toliver Richardson, in *The Afro-Latin@ Experience in Contemporary American Literature and Culture* (2016), examines contemporary work by US-based Afro-Latinos mentioning intergenerational trauma. A more recent work titled *Black American Women's Voices and Transgenerational Trauma* (2020), by Valérie Croisille, analyzes six different neo-slave narratives presenting how in various ways trauma memory turns into narrativization. Beatriz Pérez Zapata in *Zadie Smith and Postcolonial Trauma* (2021) also explores transgenerational trauma and memory by focusing on Zadie Smith's fiction.

Although trauma on the black female body is a popular topic, Laura Fish's *Strange Music*, which explicitly voices trauma through the protagonists as mothers, remains unexplored. Olivia Tjon-Meeuw's article "The Daughters of Bertha Mason: Caribbean Madwomen in Laura Fish's *Strange Music*" focuses on the madness grounded on sexual exploitation, but focuses on the daughter's view rather than the voice of the mother.

The works of black female writers who write about rape trauma “not only indict the individual action of abusers, but examine the larger social implications of power relations in this country where the marginalization of black skin and female sex are systemically and politically maintained and reproduced” (Pipes 8). Black feminist theorists have pointed to the historical violence perpetrated against black women. Collins explains that a “special theme within Black feminist thought was how the institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women operated as a mechanism of social control” (*Black Feminist Thought* 32). Rape is also an act of subjugation and, as Angela Davis writes, it “was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men” (23).

The depiction of rape trauma through fictional protagonists and individual narratives reconstructs the perceptions of the victims and their decisions. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), focus on “testimony” which is to bear witness to traumatic events. Taboo topics such as infanticide are told through the point of view of fictional black women, who usually remained silenced. Thus, the reader can understand the fatal decisions of the protagonist, as well as the impact of the fictional slave system, upon the characters. The reader is forced to re-examine and criticize the ethical concepts that he/she was exposed to. As Cathy Caruth states in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), trauma opens new possibilities for experience and new modes of understanding. The purpose of fictionalizing rape trauma is to give an awareness of the psychological effects on the protagonist. But according to Caruth, trauma is also a call to survive.

The presentation of rape trauma is also an explicit way of healing for the reader. By writing about rape trauma, the writer does not create “language of the death drive” but a “language of the life drive” (Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* xi). Caruth explains that through the help of literature, language can outcome the “damning repetition” and creates “language of departure . . . that does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death but creates a history by precisely departing toward survival” (Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* 9). The fictional black female protagonist talks about her experience, her wound, and her struggles and departs herself from the trauma towards healing.

The trauma in women's neo-slave narratives frequently focuses not only on violations upon the female body, but also on the consequences of rape on mother and child relations.

### 3. TRAUMA AND RAPE IN *STRANGE MUSIC*

Along with taboo topics such as incest and infanticide, rape was mostly avoided in the manifestations of the white patriarchal society. While contrarily most neo-slave narratives are courageous enough to articulate the trauma of rape in their depictions, Laura Fish goes a step further and reflects how rape trauma changes the relationship between mother and child.

One of the relationships depicted between is Kaydia and her daughter Mary Ann. It is disconnected due to Mary Ann's molestation by Mister Sam, who is the son of the plantation owner. Kaydia grows up on Barrett's estate and works at the house, where she lives with her partner, Charles, and their daughter Mary Ann, who is nine years old. Kaydia soon realizes that there is something wrong with her daughter. Mary Ann starts hiding in several places in the house and its compound. Kaydia remembers that soon "Mary Ann had monsters in she head. Some days she skin went hot and strange smells lived in she hair. . . . Hours later I'd find she—straw tangled into matted hair; dress skew-whiff; small body balled-up tight like she was cornered by life" (44). Kaydia understates Mary Ann's strange behaviors, while Charles quickly seeks help from the church, but this does not provide a concrete solution. Mary Ann's trauma is reflected not only in her changing attitude but also in her health. She somatizes her distress by growing lumps in her mouth and throat, which are diagnosed by the church hothouse as ulcers. Additionally, Mary Ann's physical appearance changes dramatically. She starts wearing her mother's "old faded brown dress," and she stops washing herself (44). Mary Ann feels guilty and unworthy and also reflects the need for old clothing that may give her a sense of protection (Motz 20). Although there are obvious signs that something is wrong with her, due to her young age, she is not able to voice her suffering. The only way Mary Ann is able to express her dilemma is through crying and screaming. When Mister Sam forces her into a blue dress, his present to her, she responds with "[k]icking, fighting, snarling, wildly matted mane muddled round she honey-brown neck, screaming like she felt to tackle hell's fire. . . . Then spewed everywhere" (44–45). Mary Ann refuses to wear the

blue dress, which could well symbolize eternal truth as well as fidelity (Inman 23). When Kaydia finally finds out that Mister Sam is molesting her daughter, she is not able to protect her:

Struck by a bolt of fear I stood unable to walk on in. But I did, being tied to Mary Ann by my heartstrings which came from inside out by then. Mister Sam was astride Mary Ann doing what they do. I closed door shut stealthily, noiselessly. Swallowing vile bile in my saliva what I felt I'm too sick to explain. (80)

While Kaydia is shocked, Charles, in contrast, has a startling reaction. He decides to keep Mary Ann in old shacks near the sugar-boiling house, and she is allowed to return to the main house only months later. Mary Ann is punished and isolated for being raped, when what she needs most is motherly support. It would seem that Kaydia is powerless to protect her child and she continues to live at the same house and to serve the same man.

Another disconnection occurs between Sheba, a female field worker at the Barrett sugar plantation, and her unborn child. Sheba lives with the murder of her partner Isaac because he won a cane cutting competition against Mister Sam. Additionally, Sheba is later gang-raped by the same master and white overseers. Sheba is the victim but feels ashamed, especially because her growing belly announces her pregnancy: “Me want only to climb from Trouble’s eye, from me body, skin, out from yard, shack village, plantation. Life. Hotter and hotter me feel and shivers crawl up and down me spine like frightful chill of mountain stream” (142). But this “social shame” recognized by rape victims is not the only feeling that disturbs her (Motz 110). As Anna Motz explains, “rape victims are experiencing not only the feeling of shame but also distress, physical and emotional turmoil” (137). Sheba’s emotional turmoil stems from her indecision to keep the baby. Merrill D. Smith writes that pregnancy after rape increases the “psychological trauma” and “the stress of [an abortion] could compound the already complex effects of the assault itself” (154). When she visits Leah, the old Obeah woman, Leah advises her to kill the baby after giving birth. According to Leah, the baby until the ninth day is only a spirit, a “wandring duppy” rather than a human being (145). Sheba’s decision, however, depends on the baby’s physical appearance; the baby, therefore, has to resemble Isaac and not her rapists.



In the case of Elizabeth, her father, being in fear of black grandchildren, forbids all of his twelve children from marrying, thereby determining the end of Elizabeth's right to have her own children. Elizabeth questions her father's rule, asking "[s]hould we never produce children, and remain spinsters and bachelors until the end of our years? No—I can not believe *that!*" (133). However, there will be no further generation of Barrett's, since, according to her father, "a grandchild is a dead child," and a "dark offspring" would only showcase their relations to their black slaves (177).

Although Kaydia, Sheba and Elizabeth do not live in a similar environment and each has a different past, all their lives are overshadowed by rape trauma. The inability to protect oneself or the ones they love from sexual abuse not only causes disconnection but also leads to the change of the perspective mothers adopt towards their children. The first step to these changes, however, is through the disconnection to the motherline.

#### 4. THE BROKEN MOTHERLINE IN *STRANGE MUSIC*

Kaydia, Sheba, and Elizabeth are all women who are influenced by rape trauma. Unfortunately, they keep no connection to a motherline that could have provided them with healthy guidance. Due to the lack of connection to their own mothers and othermothers, Kaydia, Sheba and Elizabeth make decisions that alter not only their own lives but also the fate of the next generation.

Kaydia's inability to construct a healthy relationship with her daughter is because she herself was separated from her own biological mother, Rebecca Laslie, by slavery. Rebecca is the mistress of Elizabeth Barrett's uncle Samuel, who dislikes his legitimate offspring. Rebecca leaves Kaydia at the Barrett's house, where Kaydia grows up without her and becomes the housemaid. Rebecca stays and serves Samuel without contacting her daughter. Years later, when Rebecca returns, Kaydia goes to visit her and hopes that her mother is going to provide her with motherly love and wisdom. Due to her miserable life as a mistress, Rebecca has become an alcoholic and Kaydia also observes that she has a "lunatic way" (83). Kaydia's desire for help ends violently. Rebecca strangles Kaydia, curses and threatens her:

Fingers crushing crack wring my neck with power of great white ox pulling cart full-a cane stack. ‘Yu no good cockroach.’ She throat grip tightens. ‘Yu no dawta. Yu waan dis, dat. Yu don’t know—too much grief. Yu have life too easy. Me had to give yu up!’ she shrieks (162).

Strangling Kaydia’s throat may be symbolic of the iron collar used for enslaved people. Rebecca reminds Kaydia that their choices regarding their lives are not in their own hands, but are influenced by the economic intentions of their white enslavers. When Kaydia turns back home, her daughter Mary Ann meets her in anger because Kaydia forgot the candles from the market. Nevertheless, this time, Kaydia realizes that she does not feel neither pity, remorse nor love towards her own daughter: “My breast holds no comfort for Mary Ann—Rebecca Laslie milked me dry of comfort. Of love” (167). Without the proper example of a healthy connection, Kaydia gives up her own mothering.

Similar to Kaydia, Sheba grows up without her biological mother. The closest woman who can provide Sheba with othermothering is her partner Isaac’s mother, Eleanor. Even small gestures by Eleanor are welcomed by Sheba, as she describes how “[w]armth spreads into me skin when she presses me hand” (27), but after Isaac’s brutal murder Eleanor is traumatized and is not able to care for Sheba. Sheba, in vain, seeks help from the Obeah woman Leah, who is rather cold-hearted and without any othermotherly attitudes such as protection, guidance or support. Leah’s solution to Sheba’s unwanted pregnancy is “coldly” to “kill” the baby (145). After giving birth to the child and seeing the white skin, Sheba is sure that it is not Isaac’s child. While Sheba hesitates to kill her baby, she tries to get help when she stumbles into Kaydia at the marketplace. Sheba feels the impulse to pass the child on to Kaydia:

In a violent rush of passing pickney she’s whisked from me sight. Inside me flare, too long imprisoned, storm-like, it a anger of anguish briefly uncovered. Holding out me pickney, begging she’ll take him, me must think of something to make she hear, make she see. Vainly me eyes search fe she face. Words run from me mouth, ‘Yu, fram Cinnamon Hill!’ me craving shout. ‘It me, Sheba!’ She name? Kaydia, me remember. But already she’s lost in a flood of market sellers. (233)

However, before she can give the baby to Kaydia, Kaydia disappears in the crowd. It would seem that Kaydia is overwhelmed with her own problems and is not able to provide help.

Elizabeth, in contrast, is almost cocooned in her room, and shows no ability to reach out for any othermothers. Due to her father's concerns about black grandchildren and her physical appearance, Elizabeth thinks that she, too, has African blood:

I am small and black. . . . A thin partition divides us; why do I regard the woman who watches me with distaste? She has a searching quizzical look, slightly remote and mischievous; the features wasted. . . . The mouth is large, obstinate, projecting—she is full lipped—and has dark eyes, deep and calm, and long thick ringlets, again, dark brown, almost black . . . (10)

Elizabeth describes herself as close to a black woman, however, she does not look for any connection to the black women around her. One of the closest black woman is Crow, her maidservant. While Crow cares for Elizabeth as if she were a little child, by nurturing, bathing, and fixing her hair, she only does her tasks and there is no development of a friendship between them. Elizabeth is friendly towards Crow, but their relationship remains an employee/employer one: "I like to be managed and she manages me well" (54). Elizabeth is also disconnected from Trippy, who is an African orphan adopted by her grandfather. Trippy announces that she will not visit the house in Torquay when Elizabeth is there (133). Although the reason is not clear, their different perspectives could have led to conflict, because Trippy has only memories of happy slaves, whereas Elizabeth as the daughter of a white plantation owner is against slavery. Elizabeth remembers that Trippy "sketched a pretty scene of how happily the Negroes lived when the sugar estates were in their prime. Like Papa she described an idyllic Jamaican childhood" (111). However, due to the stories of her uncle Richard and her brother Mister Sam, Elizabeth knows much better.

Elizabeth herself gets the opportunity to help Rebecca Laslie and, therefore, to act as an othermother. When Sam tells her during his visits that their uncle has bequeathed money to Rebecca Laslie and that he does not intend to give it to her, Elizabeth keeps silent and does not advise Sam to do otherwise. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn explain that, in doing so, Fish "creates a believably contradictory character who, for all her imaginative empathy with the protagonists of her inner vision,

continues to collude with the system when her own life might be affected” (85). Elizabeth supports Sam, who thinks “rumours of improprieties between this servant and Uncle Samuel will spread like fire across Jamaica if she does receive the legacy” (113). Here her own white privileged family becomes more important than the othermotherly or sisterly connection for a woman who deserves and needs help.

All of the novel’s protagonists experience a disconnection from their motherline. More than that, they also remain without any othermothers who might have helped them with nurturance, protection, and womanly wisdom. As a result, these women do not help each other either directly or in an indirect way.

## 5. CHILDREN OF HORROR

All of the protagonists are imprisoned through their powerlessness. Although slavery is abolished, Kaydia and Sheba remain as oppressed women since there are no rights protecting them from their master and other white people’s brutality. Fearing worse conditions, Kaydia continues to stay at the Barrett’s house at Cinnamon Hill. Sheba’s partner is murdered and she is raped and pregnant, but since she has no family to turn to nor any helpful wisdom she continues to work as a field worker. In addition, Elizabeth is not only weak and imprisoned due to her illness but also through her dominant and controlling father. This powerlessness, however, transforms the protagonists’ perspective of their own children.

Kaydia, unable to protect her nine-year-old daughter from the abuse of Mister Sam, tries to seduce him in order to distract his attention. Unfortunately, this decision turns mother and daughter into rivals, both seeking the attention of the same man. After Kaydia learns that Mister Sam molests Mary Ann, her perspective of her daughter starts changing. Mary Ann asks uncommon questions such as “Oo sleep on de ocean bed, Mama? . . . Monsters” (109) and “smiles wickedly” and that her eyes are “glazed and crazed like Rebecca Laslie’s” (61). Mary Ann, according to her mother, is cruel, since she enjoys “hurting” insects “for pleasure” (59). For Kaydia, Mary Ann turns from an innocent daughter to a creature “[c]rawling like a lizard on she belly” (66). Kaydia feels that they have lost their connection as mother and daughter: “I remember thinking she don’t belong to me anymore” (115).

Now that they both want something from Mister Sam, they turn into rivals. Despite this disconnection Kaydia still tries to help her daughter.

When Kaydia is successful and seduces Mister Sam, Mary Ann enters the bedroom. Mary Ann stands naked in the room looking at both her mother and Mister Sam. Kaydia hates Mister Sam for raping her nine-year-old daughter, but has sex with him to secure both her own and Mary Ann's future, and although Mary Ann is abused and molested by Mister Sam, she still seeks his attention. Kaydia describes:

Using arms to cover bumps where breasts soon would grow, Mary Ann struggled to tie long faded brown petticoat of mine, gathering it into bunches round she waist with string. Looking older now than Mary Ann, like my own reflection—trapped—caught in Mister Sam's staring glass, soundlessly she tiptoed through chamber doorway, and scuttled towards main stairs. (113)

Kaydia looks at her own self and believes "I'm thinking I'm no better than Mary Ann—Mister Sam's fancy thing—like all woman in this place, trampled by a man" (65). Mister Sam does not care about either Mary Ann nor Kaydia and continues to use both mother and daughter for his sexual pleasure.

Similarly, Sheba's perspective of her unborn child changes, since she does not know whose child she carries. Due to the rape trauma, Sheba imagines that the baby in her belly is like a creature growing by eating Sheba from the inside. Sheba describes "yellow buckra flesh feeding off whatever me eat. Strangled by feelings, me lie half-dead. Cyan runaway from what's in me head, what turns and grows in me belly, slides through blood" (175). Rather than enjoying her pregnancy, Sheba describes the baby as "a monster me carry, wriggling, squirming, half-made" (180). Whatever Sheba consumes benefits the baby by growing and turning stronger. While giving birth, she thinks that the "monster" "wouldn't fit, afraid me split, tear apart" (241).

It is clear that due to her rape trauma, Sheba's dislike of the child warps her perspective, because she is not able to see a baby: "Soft, smooth, warm, a pale-copper monster's born, wriggling, squirming, howling. This curious limp thing could feel, cry, stretch him spine" (140). While breastfeeding the white-skinned child, Sheba cannot stop her aversion, as if a "snake of true hatred runs through" her "blood" (191). Furthermore, the baby sucks her milk until she bleeds and Sheba remarks that the baby "drains what goodness me have" (191). According to Sheba, the baby took shape using her body and now continues to feed

on her like a vampire-like being. Due to the aftermath of her rape trauma, Sheba has no motherly feelings and breastfeeding does not provide the expected natural connection towards the child. What is more, the rape trauma does not only burden those who are raped but also those who are seemingly well-protected with their richness and status in the society.

Elizabeth, who grew up in luxury and protection in England, is burdened by the knowledge of her parents' slave business. While she is confined to her bed by a mysterious illness, Elizabeth knows much better the affliction from which she suffers; indeed, she admits, "I can't see how such a miserable treatment will affect the shedding of guilt and anxiety" (5–6). According to Elizabeth, even the opium doses and medical mixtures do not help and she thinks that her family is cursed:

I do not fear the future. It is the past that scares me. It is impossible to reconcile the past. Impossible. The past constantly visits me. All my life I have been haunted by ghosts. I believe souls live on because I can feel the spirit world. (173)

Elizabeth is haunted, especially by the story of Quasheba, a pregnant fugitive slave who is punished brutally. It is Elizabeth's uncle Richard who was involved in both gang-raping and the punishment of Quasheba. Literally paralyzed by guilty feelings, Elizabeth metaphorically creates her own baby: a haunting apparition of a black woman to whom she is connected by hate and love. This black woman haunts her like a demon "vanishing," sometimes, "into the wintry wind" (15), or as a ghost that "floats" into her room (52). While she is disturbed and wants to get "rid of" the haunting black woman, at the same time she "could not bear" to be "parted" from her (173):

The woman in the mirror has returned. I hadn't seen her for days but have felt her presence outside the door. I've been aware of her moving about my midnight candle and amongst shadows clipped by dawn. I've sensed her creeping into my thoughts, smelt her in lavender-scented sheets. Tonight she stands in shadows on the far side of the room. (15)

Elizabeth feels the presence of a demon who enters her nightmares. Elizabeth sees the black woman burning down the house: "The fire lights easily. She is burning a house of memories. Flames like some great beast, shoot though a bedroom similar to mine" (12). Elizabeth and the black

woman intermingle into one woman; they both want to get rid of the past by burning “the house of memories” (12). With the constant presence of her hallucination during the day and night, Elizabeth is overwhelmed by the feeling of guilt.

The three protagonists are facing the dilemma of their changing perspectives towards the next generations. The continuing racism and trauma of the slave system distorts their experience. Unable to deal with rape trauma, guilty feelings and ongoing confinement, Kaydia, Sheba and Elizabeth perceive the next generation as evil beings. In order to solve this dilemma, all women are going to make life-changing decisions.

## 6. OBJECTING TO THE OPPRESSIVE SYSTEM

The motherly feeling of protection seems to be overpowered by the ongoing influences of the cruel and oppressive conditions of past slavery. In an environment that benefits the white patriarchy, the women and especially mothers are oppressed and imprisoned. Kaydia is unable to protect her daughter from her rapist and subsequently feels disconnected from her; Sheba is gang-raped and has no motherly feelings towards the white-skinned baby who she gives birth to; Elizabeth is confined through her illness, and her guilty feelings alienate her from her family. In order to end this ill connection, the protagonists take different ways to object to the oppressive system.

Kaydia fails to protect her daughter Mary Ann and is not able to gain any inheritance as the mistress of Mister Sam. Charles, however, who is sick of begging Kaydia to marry him, decides to take Mary Ann and desert Kaydia. While Charles rides away with their daughter, Kaydia realizes that she has failed as a mother and lost any chance to be a mother to Mary Ann:

Turning back Mary Ann's look catches me, scorches my heart, though fire in she eye's long died out. 'Charles!' I'm bawling. 'She me dawta, yu cyan tek she way fram me!' Me cyan bear witness to dis. I'm shouting, 'No! No! No!' my voice a menacing jagged gash. Mary Ann's face screws up, hair blowing free. I sing out Wayah! Mary Ann's little screwed up face locks in me mind. Along drive I follow, flying like wicked duppy's chasing. (205)

Kaydia's “no” has no meaning anymore; her voice is not heard (205). That her daughter is compared to a “duppy” suggests an image of a

dissolving person. She runs after the cart and tries to catch them but suddenly remembers that she is pregnant and that she does have the chance to be a mother. As a result, Kaydia stops chasing: “frantic rush of dread holds me back. My belly groans. Jerking forward, back, I wobble. Can’t bear losing another pickney. Can’t take that risk. So I run away from Charles, from Mary Ann” (205). In order to be a mother again, she decides to distance herself from her family and embrace the opportunity to mother her new child.

Sheba, who desires to distance herself from the child of her rape, repeats to herself: “Cyaan name im. Me cyaan love im” (191). When she is unable to pass the baby to Kaydia, the desire to get rid of the baby increases: “Pickney’s hand’s tapping and prodding me rock hard breast, head rooting under burning swollen flesh. Temptation draw me to break him neck” (190). Hidden in the woods, Sheba observes the baby: “Cyaan hold him tenderly like it Isaac’s chile. Isaac’s chile it Cyaan be, fe Isaac’s face me should see. Should be Isaac’s skin me stroke, richly smooth dark; eyes, full bright moons” (239). After strangling and burying the child, Sheba wades into the sea in order to die and free herself from the burden of her traumatic memories. As she wades into the water, she feels that she comes closer to Isaac. Due to her inability to connect with or mother her child, Sheba seeks refuge in the illogical possibility of reconnection with her lover through death.

Elizabeth finds a way to connect to her demon child: the apparition of a black woman that represents her guilt. Elizabeth is especially haunted by the story of Quasheba and knows that she has to do something to connect to the black woman and chooses to use the art of poetry. Elizabeth seeks to get closer to the black woman and to give her a voice; she admits: “[m]ysteriously, I am beginning to experience an intense bond similar to sisterhood—a unity with the runaways’ cause. I too have a longing for freedom. A longing to flee, soul-forward” (183). By telling the story of Quasheba who has lost her lover, was gang-raped, and murdered the child of her rape, Elizabeth is able to understand her protagonists’ agony. More than that, with her poem, Elizabeth objects and openly protests the hypocrisy of the white patriarchy and how they justify their deeds using religion.

These women experience not only the disconnection to their motherline, but they are isolated through the social norms and the burden of their slave ancestry. In different ways, all of the protagonists make their own choices and therefore object to the ever-present oppressive



system. Whether it is to run to the woods creating a distance to her family, or to wade into waters to suicide, or looking inside herself to create an imaginative place, all three are making their individual choices.

## CONCLUSIONS

Laura Fish's *Strange Music* does not only share a glimpse of the slave past and the aftermath of Britain's slave history, but also explicitly presents the lives and thoughts of three different female protagonists. Elizabeth, Kaydia, and Sheba are all alienated from their biological mothers as well as from potential othermothers. Mothers and their daughters in Fish's *Strange Music* are depicted as being influenced by the forms of black mothering, especially during slavery. And their imprisonment and weaknesses are caused by the ever-present oppressive system of ownership and control by men that leads to the loss of their motherlines. Without the tradition of motherly wisdom, these women do not know how to overcome the perversion of the lasting slave system. As a result, the trauma inflicted upon their bodies changes their perspective of the next generation.

Kaydia feels disconnected from her young child daughter Mary Ann, who turns into a strange rival, just as Sheba's motherly feelings are distorted towards her baby, whom she feels is like a parasite inside her; Elizabeth, confined to her bed, creates her own child which is the hallucination of a black woman, a demon-like being who visits guilt upon her. As a result, Kaydia distances herself from her family, Sheba kills her baby and commits suicide and Elizabeth writes a poem to create evidence of the horrible events.

The different solutions that all three women present force the reader to re-consider the usual ethical concepts as well as the larger social implications of power relations. Through the disconnection to the motherline, fictional or potential mothers are left without any motherly support, which distorts their view upon their own children. Fish's novel gives voice to the mother character and declares the horrors and the responses given to the oppressive and brutal slave-system.

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