



MATERNAL GUIDANCE, INHERITED RESILIENCE, AND THE CREATION OF SELF IN JESMYN WARD'S *LET US DESCEND*

¹Roselin Shiny K,²Dr. Parimaladevi S

¹Research Scholar,²Assistant Professor

¹ Department of English,

¹Nallamuthu Gounder Mahalingam College, Pollahi, India

Abstract:

Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023) narrates the story of Annis, a young enslaved woman whose journey from North Carolina to the sugar plantations of New Orleans becomes a profound reckoning with loss, lineage, and the making of a self. Maternal guidance is the way a mother prepares her child for life. It is not just giving advice or instructions; it is about everything a mother does to equip her child for the world. This article examines how maternal guidance is transmitted through Sasha's warrior training, tender touch, bedtime stories, and fierce protective gaze, which have become the deepest resource Annis carried into captivity. Inherited resilience is the strength a person carries forward from the people who raised them. Sasha rooted Annis not in the degrading conditions of slavery but in a matrilineal warrior tradition that preceded it. When Sasha was violently taken away, her absence did not hollow her daughter out; it armed her instead. Annis measured every woman she encountered against the mother she had lost, and found the mother's lessons surfacing in her memory. The spectral presence of the ancestral spirit Aza further deepened this inheritance, connecting Annis to a lineage of Black women's endurance that no enslaver can reach or erase. The creation of the self is the process of becoming truly your own person. This article traces Annis's arc from a child held in her mother's hands to a woman who becomes her own instrument of survival. Ward presents maternal love not as mere comfort, but as a form of radical preparation that made Annis create a world of her own making.

Index Terms - maternal guidance, Black motherhood, enslaved woman, warrior lineage, body memory, self-making, matrilineal inheritance

I. Introduction:

Maternal love is the epitome of unconditional and selfless love. It is a divine reflection of God's love. Maternal love and emotional availability are vital to a child's well-being. When a child is loved by a mother at a young age, the child can cope with the stress and strains of life at different stages of life. Maternal love is not just a tender love; it may instruct and guide through the dark. In *Let Us Descend*, Sasha taught Annis to fight as it was a necessity. During the journey from North Carolina to New Orleans, Annis faced the separation of her mother and lost everyone, with whom she associated - Sasha, her mother, her lover Safi, Phyllis, Esther and Mary. Sasha narrated stories about her and her mother, Azagueni, who was called as Mama Aza hinting to Annis that she can find her futurity - find life, sustenance and liberation.

Let Us Descend is not a story of a young person finding a place in a society, but the story of a young enslaved woman who identified her worth and created a liberated life. Motherhood is shaped by the relentless demands it places on women to protect, nurture, and prepare their children for the world. This understanding of maternal responsibility captures both the deeply personal act of raising a child and the broader social expectations that have historically defined what it means to be a mother (Xamid qizi, 53-58). This article traces the portrayal of maternal tenderness and warrior pedagogy through the crisis of separation from mother, the grieving period of Annis's partial self-sufficiency, to the return of mother's voice in the novel's final moments - a voice that reveals, with devastating clarity, how a mother's love can persist even after her death.

II. Maternal guidance:

2.1 Mother's tender teaching:

Sasha conducted training sessions during the spare time in secret. The hand that cradled Annis once trained her to fight. Sasha taught her daughter to strike back. She even reminded Annis that she is a granddaughter of a woman warrior, Mama Aza. It shaped Annis during her tough times. The first weapon Annis ever held was her mother's hand - the hand that teaches, directs, corrects and above all prepares against all adversities. Ward places the mother's tenderness against the warrior training with equal care and equal weight. Annis said, "Mama has always been a woman who hides her tender heart" (Ward 4) - a woman whose softness is not a weakness; it is a complementary method of teaching. The tenderness and the sparring are not in opposition; they are two sides of the same act of preparation, and Ward renders both with the same attentiveness.

The most intimate of these tender moments is the nights after sparring, when the mother runs her fingers over Annis's scalp as a gesture of closeness and love, that physical touch was defined by its quality - lightness, care and by its function. It is a counterweight to the day's hardness. It was a gesture that says that Annis's body was not only an instrument of survival, but it was a beloved thing. Later, when Annis was in the river along with other enslaved men and women, she described the sensation of water moving over her like her mother. She described, "The bubbles tickle up my cheeks, over my scalp, and when I close my eyes, I can imagine it's my mama's hand all over me, closing me up, cradling my whole body" (Ward 73). The mother's touch has become the daughter's body memory - a place for safety.

Body memory is a kind of recollection of past experiences. It is stored as physical sensations instead of real, conscious events that have happened. Body memory is the primary subject discussed in Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*. He says that the fundamental forms of human learning are not cognitive but physical. The physical experiences that one has during any early attachment relationships shape one's responses to the world at a deeper level than conscious thoughts (Bessel, 2014). The mother's touch not only gives comfort, but it is formative. It taught Annis's nervous system what real safety felt like; the knowledge persisted in her body even after the touch was gone. After Sasha's separation, it allowed her to reconstruct her safety imaginatively which acted as a resource in the dangerous conditions.

2.2 Mother's love gaze:

The gazes of the people at Annis were different from how Sasha looked at her. Her father's gaze towards her was reduced to a property (Jing Tan, 2025). She said: "He appraises me in the same way he studies his horses, his attention as sure and close as his touch on a long-maned neck, a muscled haunch, a bowed, saddle-worn back" (Ward 6). She was mentioned as a fancy girl by a doctor who examined her before she was sold. One of the enslavers echoed the same about her - "He echoes the doctor, telling me that I am a fancy girl, my only worth between my legs" (Ward 107).

One of the most striking aspects of Ward's portrayal of the mother is the quality of her attention. Annis has affirmed this by saying, "My mother has eyes for nothing but me, only me" (Ward 22). In slavery, enslaved people are expected to look after the enslaver's needs. The enslaved people are looked down as instruments to fulfill enslavers' desires. But this mother's gaze is a radical redirection. It showed that the daughter is the world for the mother. Sasha stood for Annis when she was eyed and tried to be molested by the sire. Sasha's simple stare warned the sire but cost her to be sold to someone. The intensity of the mother's love surpasses the sire's brutality. The mother's unwavering gaze taught Annis that she is worth seeing, her personal life is real and important, and she is more than a slave. The affirmation of a child's worth is one of the greatest tools that a mother can give to a daughter.

2.3 Mother's desperate grip:

Sasha risked her own life to shield Annis from racial violence. It cost her to be sold as a slave to another person and to be separated from Annis. This sacrifice is interpreted as an act of resistance, depicting and proving that maternal love is a form of defiance against societal oppression. Ward demonstrates how maternal love is a way to rebel against social injustice. Black mothers usually endured brutality and violence. This signifies that there is an expression of courage for love and a refusal to bear mistreatment at work. This shows the mother's physical relationship with her daughter, from the bearing of infancy to the desperate running of flight.

"She carried me for such a long time- on her back, on her hip, clutched in front of her- but after days and nights passed, she put me down. Her grip on my wrist was desperate, and I tried to keep up with her jog, but she dragged me through the dirt as we ran through one evening" (Ward 171).

The above words were quite remarkable as they encode physicality and emotional complexity. Sasha deployed herself at the service of Annis's survival. Sasha put Annis down only after some days - it means that Sasha didn't abandon her, but she wanted Annis to be on her own. The desperate grip and dragging proved that Annis has to be on her own for her survival. She cannot rely on Sasha for her freedom. That dragging is what running for freedom looks like.

2.4 Mother's separation:

Sasha was taken by a Georgia man. Ward rendered this separation not as a single emotion, but a slow accumulating awareness of absence - an absence that Annis measured against every woman she encountered. She tried to find her mom in them. Annis said:

"I scoot so that my back grazes Phyllis's, and for one minute, I let myself pretend she's my mama, warm and whole" (Ward 95).

"Cora has a kindness in her that echoes my mama" (Ward 138).

"Mary ... almost as graceful as my mother" (Ward 143).

These comparisons show how much Annis missed her mother. Annis grieved over her mother, and she constantly scanned people for resemblances, reading every woman's body for traces of what she had lost. The spirit Aza was a guide to Annis throughout the novel. Ward carefully noted the moment in Annis's relation to Aza, which was inflected by her longing for her mother. "Aza is sharp and beautiful in the darkness. She looks away from me, beyond the brick walls, and her profile, for one perfect moment, is my mother's. She seems near, near in the night, and longing clangs through me" (Ward 97).

The identification of Aza with the mother was momentary. Aza was not the mother or her grandmother. Annis was aware that Aza cannot substitute her mother, but the moment of resemblance tells the readers something important about the psychological role that Aza served. Aza arrived at the point when Annis needed the guidance that her mother used to provide. Aza provided the guidance throughout the novel, not with the mother's tenderness, but with something that resembles the mother's clarity. Ward also records the dimension of a mother's loss through the words of Annis - "How every moment without her, this damned waiting without her hair, her song, her face, lasts years" (Ward 115). The distortion because of separation stretches each moment into something unbearable. This is a traumatic loss for Annis. Each day is a testament to how long the mother has been missing.

2.5 The mother's voice:

The novel's most devastating and luminous scene is the mother's return - not in person but as a voice. Annis heard her mother speak at different times, and it guided her in the way that Annis had to choose.

The mother's presence had moved inside the daughter's body, and it was no longer separable from her. This is the completion of the internalization that the novel has been tracking from the beginning. The mother's teaching, her voice, her love, and her nickname for Annis are not only remembered, but it stayed as a presence. The Biblical reference - Moses, the reeds, and the river - was not accidental. The mother had imagined for her daughter the story of Moses, a child placed in the water to be saved, who led the people out of bondage. Similarly, Annis will be saved, and she will be liberated from slavery and enter the peaceful place without any trouble. The mother's love is not shown as an emotion but as a physical force: "stronger than Aza's storm, than the sink of the earth, than the drag of the river" (Ward 266).

Ward showed the status of maternal love that was beyond the physical presence - it was presented as a force of nature, as something that operated like the gravity of water. Annis is alive with it, and she survived because of her mother's love. The Spirit Aza was present, but the mother's love is stronger than Aza's storm. The mother, not the spirit, was the final authority. This is the relationship between the real mother and the spirit.

III. INHERITED RESILIENCE:

3.1 Lineage as a foundation:

Ward establishes early in the novel that Annis's inheritance extends beyond what she can see and touch. Sasha tells Annis, "You the granddaughter of a woman warrior. She was married to the Fon king, given by her daddy because he had so many daughters, and he was rich" (Ward 2). Sasha did something significant. She located Annis's identity not based on the present conditions of slavery, but in a lineage that preceded those conditions and carried its own authority. This warrior figure not only existed as a name, a claim or a point of origin - but her presence is essential. Sasha established the fact that the learning that Annis received is not improvised in response to slavery but transmitted from a deeper tradition of Black women's strength. Sasha instilled her daughter's resilience from the beginning; she passed on what was passed on from her mother.

The warrior lineage also framed the monthly sparing sessions. Sasha taught Annis in these sessions to fight physically, with her body. These are not acts of aggression but of inheritance. Ward described this as "a woman who gives me a gift when she unsheathes herself in teaching me to fight once a month" (Ward 4). The mother reveals something of herself in the teaching, something that is usually concealed beneath the performance of compliance that enslaved life demands. During these sessions, the daughter sees the warrior that the mother has been required to hide, and receives both the skill and the permission to be a warrior herself.

3.2 Annis's body as an archive of Sasha's mother:

The maternal transmission did not come from the mother herself, but as a continued presence with Annis. It was expressed by Sasha through the following lines:

"You going to find a way, little one. I see it in you. You move like her. That way you swing your arms, the way you lean in when you run. Soon as you learned to walk, you moved like you knew how to fight. How she would curve her hands around the V of my jaw. You carry my whole mother in you. You going to find a way, Arese" (Ward 182)

The phrase "You carry my whole mother in you" was not just metaphorical, but it was a literal claim about Annis's body as an archive of Sasha's mother. The warrior grandmother's presence in Annis was not just a memory but a physical inheritance - a lineage in flesh and memory.

IV. THE CREATION OF THE SELF:

4.1 The half liberty:

Ward presents the concept of freedom through Annis's encounter with Bastian, the brother of Esther. He offered Annis to come to the borderland and live with him. Annis cannot bring herself to embrace that place as a true or lasting liberation. She had already lived through the failure of her mother's desperate escape. Annis regarded what Bastian offered as something incomplete, a conditional, provisional existence that fell short of the freedom she needed. She called it "half liberty" (Ward 249), and she didn't want to be a part of it. Annis wanted something more interior and more absolute. She didn't dream of a community that was built at the edges of the world that enslaved her; she dreamt of a selfhood built entirely on her own terms - a life she authors rather than one she merely survives. Annis said - "I want to walk through a world of my own making" (Ward 250). Her ambition is not

only personal. She carried with her the weight of every woman in her maternal line who came before her and was denied the chance to walk freely and wholly as herself. (Groomes 30)

4.2 I am my own weapon:

From the child who was carried on back, hip and front, Annis became a woman who was alight with her mother's love after her mother's death. Annis didn't become herself, leaving her mother behind. She became herself by receiving what the mother had given, which was no longer separable from who she was. The love that was a draft became everything around Annis. The warrior training, the tenderness, the touch on the scalp, the nickname, the grandmother's legacy, the promise that the mother will always be there - all these are expressions of the same draft that Annis felt light in the river. The presence of the mother and the guidance of the ancestral spirit guided Annis during the hardships of enslavement, and it helped her to embark on the transformative journey of self-discovery and resilience (Brown, 2025).

The mother's guidance didn't make Annis dependent; instead, it made her capable of facing her own giants. The love that was a draft in the room became the light that illuminated the daughter at the moment of greatest darkness. Annis became what her mother always intended - her own weapon, out of everything that her mother gave her. Annis mentioned this as "You your own weapon, my mama said. I am my own weapon" (Ward 262).

Sasha didn't prepare Annis for a specific future she can foresee; she prepared Annis to be capable of everything, whatever the future holds. At the end of the novel, Annis was not just a woman who had followed her mother's instructions but a woman who had understood them - who had lived them so deeply that they were not distinguishable from her own thoughts and will.

V. Conclusion:

Let Us Descend is a novel about many things - slavery's violence, spiritual endurance, and forced migration. It is a novel about what one mother gave to her daughter and what the daughter made out of it. Sasha was a mother of extraordinary complexity who loved her daughter with everything that she had and prepared her for everything she faced in her life. Sasha gave Annis - a warrior's body, the reader's eye, the survivor's silence, the knowledge of her origin, and her self-worth.

Annis did not endure her suffering alone. Even after her mother's separation, the love and lessons she taught remained alive within her - settled in her body, surfaced when she needed them the most. Apart from her mother, the grandmother's warrior strength flowed quietly through the maternal line like a river that never runs dry. The Spirit Aza guided Annis, and it was Annis's constant companion whenever she was alone. These connections didn't spare Annis from pain. They didn't shorten the march or soften the brutality of enslavement. But they gave her something no enslaver can reach - a sense of self that did not begin with her captivity and therefore cannot be wholly destroyed by it. Annis slowly and painfully began to reclaim herself.

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