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Restoring the Memories of Joining Between Mother and Son

A Reading of Lorna Goodison's Maternal Poems

Lorna Goodison's poetry encompasses a wide range of topics reflecting her concern with intersecting issues confronting postcolonial Africaribbean women writers: race, gender, culture, spirituality, sexuality, class, language, history and, most of all, the reclamation of an Africaribbean motherhood and matrilineage. Because motherhood is central to the experiences of most Africaribbean women, Goodison's desire to construct an Africaribbean matrilineage leads her to positively consider the issue of Africaribbean motherhood and mothering. Her position attempts to develop a rhetoric of recovery of Africaribbean motherhood and mothering in response to her experience of being mothered and being a mother herself, and in contradiction to the decades of seeing Afrisporic mothering as deviant and emasculatory of their men-children. Goodison's poetic of recovery is linked to the voices of other Africana Womanists poets including Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Cynthia James, Grace Nicols, and a host of others. Their voices are joined to those of Afrisporic theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Bell-Scott, Andrew Billingsley, Paula Giddings, Robert Staples, and Bette J. Dickerson. As a team, they not only question but also provide alternatively more in-depth and reclamatory readings of Afrisporic motherhood and mothering. This does not of course suggest that all Afrisporic women writers engage in this redeeming design to reclaim themselves by positively reclaiming Afrisporic mothering and motherhood. Rather, there are a few writers who present a very problematic relationship with the mother. The case of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* is one example.

Most of the writing by Afrisporic women has tended to focus on the daughter-mother relationship, but little has been heard about the mother-son relation from the perspective of the mother as writer. One often has to look into

the writings of Afrisporic male writers, who tend to romanticize the mother, and gloss over problematic issues in the relationship. In this paper, I examine four of Goodison's poems to show her unequivocal stand for motherhood, which is built around the mother-son relationship. Her stance is a not a retrogressive move into voluntary and involuntary entrapment in the world of patriarchal constructions of motherhood. I explore the mother-son connection in the poems, "My Last Poem," "Songs for My Son," "My Will," and "My Last Poem (Again)." In these poems, Goodison's songs of love to her son help fill what Nina Lyon Jenkins calls the "voids in our existing knowledge of the diversity of Black women's experiences" particularly as mothers (208), which needs to be understood within the milieu of Africaribbean socio-cultural and historical dynamism, and blended with conceptual frames on mothering from other feminist postulates. The poems demonstrate Goodison's concern for her son's future in a racist, sexist, and a classist world in which to be an Africaribbean male means to be threatened with all sorts of invisible dangers to the personhood. Thus, Goodison's poetic blessings, incantations, spells, and advice are all tended to the son in maternal love, which transcends biological nurturing and hidden psychological desires and designs of power play. Of course, as Paul Olsen (1981) has postulated, the language and contents of Goodison's poems can easily be misread as an attempt on her part to use her position of power during the son's infancy to shape his "whole world perceived and interpreted" by her (15). Nonetheless, Goodison's poems do demonstrate aspects of the first two stages delineated by Olsen to explain a mother's hidden attitude toward her son (at this stage of the son's infancy), to verbally and nonverbally shape her son's future (16).

These hidden attitudes are what Adrienne Rich (1976) identifies as the "special version of the mother-son relationship" (202). For Goodison, an Africaribbean mother, this special version does not rise simply from internal cultural dynamics, but from an externally constructed ideology, often imposed upon the group as a method of control over their self-definition. The history of their enslavement, colonization, and racist denigration and rejection, is compounded by other socioeconomic forces arraigned against her in a sexist society. Rich has pointed out that the Afrisporic mother then "has been charged by both white and black males with the 'castration' of her sons through her so called matriarchal domination of the family, as breadwinner, decision-maker, and rearer of children in one" (204). But as Rich further recognises, these so-called qualities of the Afrisporic mother are severely curtailed by "the bonds of racism, sexism, and poverty" (204). Rich writes:

What is misread as power here is really survival-strength, gut, the determination that her children's lives shall come to something even if it means driving them, or sacrificing her own pride in order to feed and clothe them. In attributing to the black mother a figurative castration of her sons, white male racism which has literally castrated

[millions] of black men, reveals yet again its inextricable linkage with sexism. (204)

Apt as Rich's (1976) elucidation of the causes of Afrisporic mothers' oppression, and subsequent apportioning of blame, her position, nonetheless, locks Afrisporic mothers and sons perpetually into a dichotomous location in which Afrisporic women are seen merely as victims and the sons as ungrateful misogynists, who link up with the dominating white male to oppose the Afrisporic mother. In so doing, Rich fails to recognise any agency among Afrisporic mothers, and consequently ignores the role played by Euro-American racism and misogyny to influence the Afrisporic male's attitude to women.

My focus on Goodison's is dictated by her unique position as a poet-mother writing dealing with her relationship to her man-child. Moreover, Goodison's ability to publicly celebrate her "maternal presence and influence" (Hirsch, 1989: 416), deserves study. Her poems proclaim what Robin Morgan asserts as the "concept of mother-right, affirmation of a woman's child-bearing and/or child-rearing when it is a woman's choice" (8). In addition, Goodison as mother and poet articulates the position which does not paint glorious "portrayals of strong and powerful mothers," but rather of a fearful mother whose position is ambiguous because of "the relative absence of fathers" (Hirsch, 1989: 416). Thus Goodison's poems display what Hirsch has argued is "[a] uniquely female tradition ... in which to explore issues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence" (416). This absence of fathers to help Africaribbean mothers raise their sons is variously articulated in Africaribbean male narratives. In this absence of a father figure to help raise sons, Africaribbean mothers do both the mothering and fathering. The combination of the two roles is defined by Collins as motherwork (47-49).

While recognizing the history of slavery, racial oppression, and sexism, which have all affected Africaribbean mothers' relationship to their sons, Grace Nicols, nevertheless, still "reject[s] the stereotype of the 'long-suffering black woman'" (1990: 284). She worries about the "danger of reducing the black woman's condition to that of 'sufferer,' whether at the hands of white society or at the hands of black men" (285). But such reductionism completely denies the women any agency. This reductionism engenders a pervasive myth about how female headed households in Afrisporic families is dysfunctional and deviant, and is perpetuated by such patronizing, racist, and sexist writings as the *Moynihan Report* (1965). These myths have successfully been rebutted by several writers including Norma J. Burgess (1995: 21-36). The matriarch's reputed power and dominance over men are nullified in the light of the reality in Africaribbean socioeconomic relations. Senior (1991) writes that while "younger, upwardly mobile women nowadays voluntarily choose single parenthood and household headship, for the older women, there is usually no choice; the role is foisted on them by circumstances" (102). Consequently, Senior's research reveals that these "female household heads on the whole are poor,

black, uneducated and in the worst paid and lowest status jobs. These women are truly working miracles, in ensuring at least the survival, and sometimes the advancement, of their families” (102). It is this crippling poverty that Goodison captures so eloquently in “My Last Poem” as she ponders what will happen to her and her son now that her father is dead (32).

Senior’s (1991) research echoes earlier work by Leota Lawrence (1983). Leota argues that in spite of these women’s terrible socioeconomic locations, they all seem to place a high premium on the value of motherhood as a trope of self-validation and fulfilment (4). Motherhood, writes Lawrence, is the unifying vision of women in the Caribbean. Goodison celebrates these views in her own poems to her son. She does not see motherhood as a male-inspired construct to bind women to biological determinism. As she insists in a conversation with Denice Narain DeCaries, “this (motherhood) is an important issue. ... I cannot see my life without mothering a child. ... it’s just something I couldn’t see myself not doing because to me having a child is the key to a whole lot of things in myself” (23).

Goodison’s position is supported by research findings of both Senior (1991) and Hodge (1990). On one the hand, Senior’s research on motherhood concludes that “childbearing is one of the few areas in the lives of Caribbean women that is not surrounded by ambivalence. There is an almost universal impulse to mothering....” (66). She further states that in spite of the advances made in the lives of women through education, “the view persists that the real vocation for women is motherhood” (66). Merle Hodge (1990) draws the same conclusion (41). On the other hand, both Senior and Hodge postulate that this type of motherhood ideology can be an oppressive expectation to some other women. For instance, Africaribbean women may actually be socially pressured to become mothers early, even when they may otherwise would have loved to pursue a carrier, or further their education. This contrary perception is well articulated in Sybil Seaforth’s recent novel, *In Silence the Strands Unravel* (1999). Here, four middle class women lament the loss of their individual desires for personal and career growths because of their choice of Victorian concepts of motherhood as the best and only choice for women.

In spite of all the issues raised, which seem to suggest that Afrisporic mothers have no agency, this really is not the case. Afrisporic mothers have an agency which is embedded in the “Afrocentric tradition ... [of] motherhood of varying types, whether blood mother, othermother, or community othermother” (Collins, 1994: 207). The problem that arises here is how that agency is utilized in the socialization of sons by mothers without falling into the traps of bad mothering set by sexist and racist misogynists. Rich (1976) advises that if mothers want their sons to grow up un mutilated by sexist attitudes, they must sensitize their sons on all aspects of misogyny while developing strategies of negotiation against their exclusion from social discourse (207) still dominated by patriarchy. The method of socialization of sons by Afrisporic mothers is encapsulated in the question: “what do I want for my son?” (211). Rich’s

statement below suggests a possible solution:

Women who have begun to challenge the values of patriarchy ... want [their sons] to remain, in the deepest sense, sons of the mother, yet also to grow into themselves, to discover new ways of being men even as we are discovering new ways of being women. We would wish that there were more fathers—not one, but many—to whom they could also be sons, fathers with the sensitivity and commitment to help them into manhood in which they would not perceive women as the sole sources of nourishment and solace. (211)

A way of fostering this concept of the new man in a man-child is for the mother to craft the tools that would enable the man-child to possess the “courage of women” (215), so that he can avoid retreating into the “old male defences, including that of a fatalistic self-hatred” (215). Carole Klein (1984) interprets this method of man-child education as the ability to help the man-child recognize, develop, and synthesize his feminine and masculine personalities (245). Goodison negotiates her response to the question through her poetry. “Song for My Son” begins with a confession of anguish of a mother who fears for the loss of her son to death: “I live in fear of his hurt, his death. / The fear is real” (43), even though every rise and fall of breath of this “man-in-miniature” (43) assures Goodison that he is alive. Goodison’s concern for the well-being of her son is reflective of the maternal fear that if the man-child is to die, then all her labour of love would have been in vain, and her desires to leave her mark in the world would have come to nought. At this stage of the relationship between mother and son, we see Goodison displaying what Olsen has defined as the first stage of four overlapping stages through which a mother gradually shapes her son’s future to coincide with her deepest aspirations for him. This first stage is “where her fantasies and attitudes, joys, fears, and hates will be communicated primarily nonverbally, though accompanied by words” (16). These perplexing responses by the mother are well represented in a poem by Theresa Lewis, an Africaribbean Canadian poet.

Her eyes were shining brightly
A glow was stretched
around her skin-tight face

She laughed out brashly
when they said
‘You’ve had a boy’

A boy? she queried wildly
(as though the specie
had a dozen kinds)

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A boy ... a boy?
She laughed again in wonder

But when they placed him
in her arms
she cried
she cried
she cried!
("Motherhood")

The new mother expresses emotional ambivalence toward her new born boy, not only from the way she responds to the news of the sex of the child, but also in the manner in which she physically demonstrates that response through laughter and tears. The laughter is brash and wild, and the tears are uncontrollable. Her tears can be a sign of either over-joy or over-sorrow. The unworldly laughter, and the unstoppable tears, perhaps originate from both fright and hope. She hopes, as Klein puts it, that her son "can more easily than his mother, possess the world she brings him into, because he is a sexual 'other'" (12), but fears what the system in Canada may do to him because he is a racial "other." Unlike Goodison's "Song for My Son," "Motherhood," does not dramatize a son's birth as the occasion for family and generational reunification, bonding, and an experience of momentary peace. Both mothers, however, share the same sense of loss of their girlhoods (Klein 12), and the control and connection between them and the man-child, now that the cord of connection has been severed at birth.

If in Lewis' poem then the new mother's reactions are unpredictably contradictory, Goodison as mother suffers from insomnia, which is instigated by fright that her son may die, and in so doing, deny her the chance to imprint herself on the world through him. She hoists herself above her ill son, praying and bargaining with God for his survival. The son's "... stomach hurt[s]" (43) from the mothers' breast milk. The situation is aggravated because "my son cries / the cats answer" (43). Her fears are linked to what some might label as maternal folk superstition caused by a sense of insecurity traceable to her cultural and adopted narratives about the evil powers of cats. The regeneration of this fear makes Goodison semi-paralysed, and she falls into a trance. In this state, she relives her time of labour when she is reunited with the spirits of foremothers and othermothers, who all come to help her go through the arduous task:

They gather from beyond
through the trees they come
gather on the banks of the family river
one by one they raise the keening song
great grandmother Rebecca of the healing hands

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Tata Edward, Bucky, and Brownman
my father's lost mother Maria
and now my father
come to sing the birthsong
and Hannah horsewoman to ride me through
("Songs for my Son" 43-44)

This spiritual and communal act of birthing practices is traceable to Africa. After the son is out, and after they have told her the sex of the child, they immediately let her know that the real work of mothering has just begun. What Goodison so ably captures in this poem is very well documented by the female shaman, Sobonfu E. Somé's (1999: 56-70). In African cultures, writes Somé, every child is a spirit that takes on human flesh. Hence, Goodison's midwife "summons the appropriate spirits / to witness your crowning" even as she severs the cord that bonded mother and son (44). Consequently, both mother and son: "... we'll never smell / its primal top-notes ... / without memories of our joining" (44). But this statement cannot be taken to imply a weakening of the usually very close relationship between Africaribbean mothers and sons. Goodison identifies a three-way connection between her and her man-child that hold this relationship together. These include the womb and severed umbilical cord, the breast of the mother that now provides milk to the infant son, and the fact that the child is flesh of her flesh. Also, the three-way connection is drawn from Goodison's Afrocentric cultural praxis in which the birth of a child concretizes the cyclical link of the ancestors (past), the mother (present) and the child (future). It is this three-way connection that will ensure a continuity and strengthening of mother-son bonding. In this triad, there is no mention of the son's father. Interestingly, the father figure that is represented is Goodison's father's spirit, who joins her other relatives during her labour.

The presence of the paternal spirit in what is usually considered in both Africa and among Africaribbean communities to be an all female affair speaks volumes of untold connections. His presence at the birth of his grandson by a daughter who possesses the qualities of the son he probably wanted, but who instead had a daughter, blends well into the patriarchal environment in which households are mostly female-headed. This testifies to some extent the desire of Goodison to have a father figure for her son. Failing that, she would rather have her own father as that figure, not just to seal the grandfather-grandson bond to ensure the passing on of family tradition of maleness, but also to satisfy Goodison's desire "for a second chance to form a love bond with her father, through delight in a boy who shares their genes and is part of their family history, and can have important aspects of redemption. The loneliness and pain of her own childhood—which Goodison articulates in "For My Mother (May I Inherit Half of Her Strength)" (71-74)—may recede beside the happy continuity of generations that she has made possible" (Klein 20). The son is

named Miles “for the music, and for coming / a long way” (44).

In “My Will,” the stage of “separation-individuation” seems to have been passed, and Goodison begins the process of disengaging herself from the self of the son. But in order to facilitate this move, Goodison must hand over certain treasures that will prepare the son to meet the bumpy and unfriendly world outside the domestic sphere, and beyond the power of mother’s protection. Song is the first gift she allocates to him because in diasporic African communities music is “This sweet immediate source / of release ...” (45), and through music “... God takes hints” (45). Song incorporates the psalms of faith, the religions and Africaribbean spiritualities, which have over the years sustained Africaribbean people in the face of slavery, colonization, poverty, and racism. The next gift to the son is a prayer that the son will grow up respecting his elders “in the layered love of our / simplest ways” (45). Again, the mother’s spirituality burst forth as she instructs her son to be thankful to God for every meal he gets. She ardently prays that her son may never “know hungry” (45). Goodison’s relationship with her son is reflective of the spiritual and corporeal aspects of mother-son relationship, but does not seem to reflect the idea of mother-power through which she engages structural designs to mould the future of her son. What is clear here is the demonstration of the dual roles of the Africaribbean mother, who in the absence of the son’s father, assumes the burden of being both a father and a mother to her son, and giving him the appropriate tools with which to face the world as he matures and becomes independent.

Collins (1994) has stressed that among racial ethnic mothers, “preparing children to cope with and survive within systems of racial oppression is extremely difficult because of the pressures for children of racial ethnic groups to assimilate” (57). She postulates further that “mothers” in these circumstances, are therefore forced to “make varying choices in negotiating the complicated relationships of preparing children to fit into, yet resist, systems of racial domination” (58). One of the negotiating strategies is for mothers to “transmit sophisticated skills to their children, enabling them to appear to be submissive while at the same time to be able to challenge inequality” (59). Goodison’s actions then must be seen as an attempt to negotiate possibilities for her son within the narrow confines in which they as Africaribbeans find themselves in North America. The advice to put on a “patina a shade subdued / so when you bloom they / will value it” (46) is one of these negotiating strategies she is teaching her son. Another strategy is knowledge through education. She tells him to love books. To Goodison, education is the best way for her son to rise above the peripheral location into which Africaribbean males are marooned by the system. Because Goodison is politically conscious, and an Africana womanist, she realizes that her son cannot afford to rely on the system. Moreover, as she puts it, even human friendship does fail, but not so with knowledge. Success for her son does not also mean material wealth or financial success: “too many die/kill for it / besides its face is too bold” (46).

From this preview of the two poems, it is realized that Goodison desires to raise her man-child according to the cultural dictates of her community which stresses the need for the son to “respect her way of offering love and to believe that hard work is often the irreducible factor for survival, not something to avoid” says June Jordan (1984: 105). Goodison also creates a safe environment for her son to grow up in. bell hooks has written extensively about the nature of such safe havens Afrisporic mothers provide for their children. Like Jordan’s mother, who provided a reliable space for her children to “pursue the privileges of books and music” (105), Goodison also desires to provide a similar space for her son to grow up in.

In “My Last Poem,” Goodison is a desolate and destitute maternal figure with a son to look after. Her lamentation originates in a feeling of insecurity caused by her father’s death, and the threat of abandonment. In this position, her creativity diminishes, as well as her material resources. She is suddenly confronted with the spectre of starvation in the face of the absence of a father figure in both her life and that of her son. Her situation is ameliorated with the help of an othermother. In this situation, her immediate desire is to feed her son. In order to get food, Goodison utilises the services of the othermother:

I gave my son
to a kind woman to keep
and walked down through the valley
on scarred feet,
across the river
and into the guilty town
in search of bread (32)

The bakery is shut. She returns to her son, not in a mood of panic and manic depression, but in state of renewed creativity in spirit. Thus, instead of bread, she feeds him with poetry. There is a hint to the biblical statement that “man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In the place of God, substitute the mother.

Subsequently, when the act of creative writing is combined with the act of reproduction of species through a mother, she becomes a co-creator with God. In a similar way then, Goodison in “My Last Poem (Again)” (80), equates the birthing of her son to the process of creative writing. As a woman and a mother, she feels the connection between the two. This connection is defined by love, the same type of love that Rich (1976) articulates in her writing.

Goodison writes:

Poems, you were blood leeches attaching yourself to me
in my should-have-been-brighter moments.
You put to flight lovers who could not compete
you forced yourself into my birthing bed

so I delivered one son and a poem. (80)

Goodison confesses that the poem is not her best, but insists that it nonetheless chronicles her autobiography for her son's education. Goodison's role as autobiographer to provide her son with a sense of his history, is symptomatic of the place of the mother as storyteller and oral historian in both African and Africaribbean communities. This important function of the mother in Africana communities is arguably not peculiar to African and Afrisporic women, but it is much more prevalent among them (Rushing 1978: 19). In this process of educating the son about his history, the son shows he is not just an uncritical recipient of such knowledge. He establishes his individuation through a critically engaging discourse in which he requests the mother to write poems that will leave some room for negotiable responses. The dialogue between mother and son not only shows a recognition by the son of the mother's legitimate claim to a separate identity, but the son's own graduated move toward maturation. This acknowledgement of a separate maternal identity amalgamates with the son's endorsement of the mother's authenticity of voice. The discourse also ensures a continuation of the connection between them. When the son, therefore, stresses that the mother should relax her hold on him a bit to allow this dialogue of ideas between mother and son, and between different traditions, she suddenly realizes that she has successfully raised a man-child, and that she has also almost become a woman. But this recognition fails to free her from continuing to see him in her heart as her baby:

I warm my son's clothes
in this cold time
in the deep of my bosom
and I'm not afraid of love
In fact, should it be
that these are false signals I'm receiving
and not a real unqualified ending
I'm going to keep the word love
and use it in my next poem (33)

This perceptual framing of the son in an eternal infant stage has been exposed and critiqued as one of the indirect causes of the tensions between sons and mothers, and also a source of male excuse for excesses. Goodison's infantilization occurs in the creative sphere where the son's maturing sensibilities are recognized and immortalized in poetry. On the one hand, creativity to Goodison involves a re-visioning of the Eurocentric patterns of mother-son concerts into which Afrisporic mothers have unwillingly and sometimes unwittingly been pushed and locked. On the other hand, re-visioning as a praxis is a way of synthesizing Africana mothering and Euro-American mothering techniques in order to raise her son in the way that Rich (1976)

canvasses feminist mothers to do. Re-visioning, as seen in Goodison's poems, then implies acts of transcending boundaries that limit the wealth of experience between mother and son.

This re-visioning poetics prevents Goodison from demonstrating in her poems the same terror and ambivalence manifested in Lewis' poem. There are also no signs of that repressed rage, which Rich (1976) delineates as being responsible for the fostering of masculine aggressiveness in sons by mothers (206). Goodison's structural design for her son's welfare does not, however, stem from a belief that society has created more opportunities for male children, as Rich has emphasized (193). But considering the history of Afrisporic people, the system has created fewer opportunities for Afrisporic males. The so-called qualities of independence of men, which make them "actively willing, original" with no room for the "self doubt and ambivalence" (193), that Rich confesses stirs her to want to be a male, are not the same reasons for Goodison's instruction to her son. Rather, these qualities are to be inherited from Goodison, who is described as a headstrong woman: "It's a son, a great grand grandson, a man / born to a headstrong, heartfoolish woman" (44). Of course, Rich stresses that she possessed all those qualities in her youth and wanted her sons to inherit them from her (194).

Like Rich, therefore, Goodison's poetic talent becomes the medium through which she articulates the implications of womanhood/motherhood, but it is in only the three poems that she presents us with a personal testimony of what it means to be an Africaribbean mother to a son. In these poems, Goodison, as the mother of a man-child, situates herself in a position to see her son, as Rich puts it, "not as 'sons' and potential inheritors of patriarchy, but as the sweet flesh of infants, the delicate insistency of exploring bodies, the purity of concentration, grief, or joy which exists undiluted in young children, dipping into which connected me with long forgotten zones in myself" (1976: 194). For Goodison, these "long forgotten zones" of herself are situated within patriarchy and the peculiarities of Africaribbean history, dipped in the experience of slavery, colonialism and neo-globalist American imperialism. As Marianne Hirsch (1989) infers, these multitudinous locations into which Afrisporic mothers have been constantly rotated, creates among Afrisporic writers the "complicated feelings that shape the portraits of mothers, and the tremendously powerful need to present to the public a positive image of black womanhood" (417). Of course, this attempt to present a positive image of Afrisporic motherhood to the world is underscored by the relationship between boys and their mothers.

As stated above, this relationship is considered sacrosanct and celebrated thus by notable Africaribbean male writers including Edward Kamau Brathwaite in *Mother Poem*, and in George Lamming's *In The Castle of My Skin*. Hence, Andrea Benton Rushing (1978) has stated that "the image of the mother is the most prevalent image of black women" in their poetry. In the works of majority of Africaribbean male writers also, the mother figure rises like a supra-natural

being to give love, nurture, guidance, healing, and protection to sons in a hostile world without reliable fathers. These mothers give of their best to their sons because they do not want the sons to experience the same type of rejection and humiliation that they go through to provide for them. Indeed, far from emasculating the sons, Afrisporic mothers actually create in some of these sons a suffocating psychological misogyny which is critiqued by Michelle Wallace (1980). But from the evidence above, it can be assumed that Goodison's relationship with her son as presented in the poems will create a man who possesses the courage of women.

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