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Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: Complexities of familial love

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Abstract

Love and its scarcity is the central issue Morrison deals with over and over again in her fictional works. Like her other novels in *Song of Solomon* too Morrison has introduced the fears of black America – of the disintegration of black identity and the demolition of African values after the love for consumerist/capitalist culture. Morrison has clearly underlined that in the state of isolation or without an individual's integration into his/her community, wholeness can never be realized. Written around the emergence of Civil Rights Movement, the novel is mainly focused on the subject of a free black man. That the novel emphasizes Morrison's adoration for the black man can be testified by the fact that she has written this novel in the memory of her no more loving "Daddy". Sharing the title and theme with an Old Testament book, *Song of Songs*, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* narrates the tale of an emotional alienated black man, Milkman and his quest for family gold which eventually turning his love for money into love for family inheritance and spirituality leads the reader into a debate on internal purification and love as sacrifice and love as possession and accumulation. This paper explores the complications of familial love in both emotionally dead family of the Deads and emotionally enriched family of Pilate.

Keywords: Love, family, complexity

Introduction

Combining the familial structure of Morrison's first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* and thus introducing a patriarchal nuclear set up and a three generational all women family structure, *Song of Solomon* juxtaposes the collectivism of Afro-American familial pattern with alienation of western nuclear family. The insensitive head of the Dead family, Macon II, does not love its members rather he chooses money and materialism as the substitutions of love object. His insensitive approach warps the capacity to love of his entire family thrusting each Dead in emotionally estranged existence. His house looks "more prison than palace" where "Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear" (*SOS* 9, 10). Bjork says "Macon's manipulation of power and of people as objects not only inhibits him from establishing loving, sensitive relationships, but it also enables him to escape his own identity and heritage" (84).

The nuclear family of Macon Dead is comprised of his wife, Ruth, two daughters, Lena and Corinthians and one son, Macon Dead III, eminently known by his nickname, Milkman. He holds his sister, Pilate, whom he once loved deeply, in repulsion for her non-materialism. In contrast to Macon, Pilate's extended family, encompassing her daughter, Reba and her daughter's daughter, Hagar, lives on the margins in austerity. Furman suggests "Macon's greedy obsession with owning things and people is a mutated version of his love, as a child, of the land and his family" (39).

Macon inherited from his father the love of land. His early life spent on the farm land under the warmth of his loving father is marked with intensity of emotions. Samuels explains, it was "an Edenic world whose fertile soil enhanced bonding between father and son as well as providing the fulfilling experience" (59). Macon's father, Macon Sr., was the reflection of a traditional black fatherhood. He was a caring and committed father; he didn't fly off and leave his children like his father. He nurtured his children without the support of their mother. Under the philosophy of material economy and emotional richness of his father Macon too learned to love integrity and reliability of character. Leading an elementary life in intimacy to nature both father and son cherished to cultivate their land. But the cruel end of

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his father by whites and consequent disruption of the familial tenderness murders the son's scrupled humanity, making him a follower of Mammon. Despite tending his blood relations Macon caresses the symbols of wealth, the keys of his houses: "curled his fingers around them, letting their bunchy solidity calm him . . . and . . . fondled them from time to time as he walked down Not Doctor Street to his office" (*SOS* 17). His efforts to seek escape from the painful memories of past make him a repressed person. Unfortunately, for his love of money/*cupiditas* he marries a woman who herself had a distorted psyche. As a result, instead of love it is hatred that rules their married life: "His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her" (*SOS* 10). However the circumstances were ordinary at the outset. Macon later tells his son, it was a time when love was not seen as the origin of relationships as it is seen now since; "Flocks were expected to be civilized to one another, honest, and – and clear" (70). The thing, which provokes Macon's abhorrence to his wife, is Ruth's incestuous attachment to her father. With starvation for love and affection Morrison mingles morbidity. Alienation after her mother's death propels Ruth to love her father and pine for his love as a child stunting her growth, though she assumed duties as the woman of the house. Morrison further complicates the love between the father and the daughter by highlighting the confusion in Dr. Foster's psyche about his love for his wife and for his daughter:

Fond as he was for his only child, useful as she was in his house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling . . . At sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at night . . . and plant a kiss on her lips. Perhaps it was the loud silence of his dead wife, perhaps it was Ruth's disturbing resemblance to her mother. More probably it was the ecstasy that . . . he felt inappropriate to the occasion. (23)

Though, he loves his daughter, the use of the word "chafe" shows his embarrassment at her constant demands for closeness and love exchanges.

Dr. Foster, himself an enigmatic character, cannot remain away from her daughter. Macon's repugnance at Dr. Foster's delivering both daughters of Ruth is marked: "I didn't like the notion of his being his own daughter's doctor" but "both times he was there. She had her legs wide open and he was there" (71). Marianne Hirsch rightfully comments: "he is unable to find an acceptable delimitation between parental love and transgressive incestuous closeness" (Bloom 149). In addition to this, his being an addict also confirms his abnormality. Another instance strengthens Macon's allegation. Macon reports: "In the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him . . . she had his fingers in her mouth" (*SOS* 73). Uncertain as Macon too is about their sexual links, it definitely establishes abnormalcy in the father and the daughter. There may be probability of an incestuous relationship between them. But it is difficult to proclaim it since the scene is marked with the death of one character and another character, Ruth, who survives always performs like a complex and mysterious personality. The probably nasty relationship of Ruth with her father freezes Macon's relationship with his own daughters also.

Ruth's attachment to her father continues after his death. Her visits to his grave indicate her necrophilia, although she rationalizes it as her strong attachment for he was the only person in her life who cared for her or took interest in her. Being pressed small in the big house of the doctor, Ruth never felt the need of companions because she had her father always loving and concerned. So it may be her emphasis on keeping that intimacy alive because she says, "It was very important for me to be in his presence, among his things, the things he used, had touched. Later . . . When he left it, I kept on reigniting the cared-for-feeling that I got from him" (*SOS* 124). Ruth's strange obsession for her dead father mirrors Freudian purported parent-child abnormal love fixation. Her growth is stuck in a phase when libido, observing halt, is overwhelmed by fixation.

Thus having her *anaclitic* needs i.e. ego preservative needs attached to the sexual needs fulfilled from her father Ruth makes him her first and long-lasting love object. A victim of irresistible sexual attraction she passes one more equally abnormal fixation to her son, Milkman. Morrison says, "she regarded him as a beautiful toy, a respite, a destraction, a physical pleasure" (*SOS* 132). Furthermore, by showing the mother, Ruth's fixation upon her child, Morrison is reworking the above discussed Freudian parent-child libidinal attachment. In Morrison's works there has been abundance of such maladjusted cases. On the one hand Morrison shows how absence of parental love blocks the possibility of a person's capacity to love healthily; on the other hand she also shows how the disturbed emotional intimacy and excessive dependence of parent upon child or vice-versa hinders the possibilities of children's healthy growth to love.

When suspecting incest, Macon breaks up his sexual link with her, to compensate for her sexually deprived life, Ruth seeks Milkman as a substitute of Macon by giving him breastfeed past infancy as she says, "something else is needed to get from sunup to sundown" and it was like "a balm, a gentle touch," "a pleasure she hated to give up" (*SOS* 13, 14). Susan wills too says "Shunned by her husband, she turns inward to necrophilic fantasies of her father, a mildly obscene relationship with her son, and masturbation" (qtd. in Gates and Appiah 319-320).

Ruth is a failed mother, though she says "I would have happily died except for my babies", she cannot give them a healthy upbringing (*SOS* 125). She is solely centered on her son, Milkman because she thinks that he will be a supplement of alliance between them "the son she bore was first off a wished-for bond between herself and Macon, something to hold them together and reinstate their sex lives" (131). But contrary to this the child becomes a bone of contention between them "Then the baby became the nausea . . . He became a plain on which . . . she and her husband fought" (131,132). When she fails to win Macon's love she uses her son as a mean of rebelliousness against Macon. Bjork quotes "Milkman is "her single triumph," and her personal affrontery to a world that has given her neither love nor purpose" (88). Though, Macon is unknown of the origin of his son's nickname, Milkman, it greatly inflames him. He feels it quite, "dirty, intimate, and hot" (15) somehow linked to his wife's impure attachment with her father: "that wherever the name came from, it had something to do with his wife and was, like the emotion he always felt when thinking of her, coated with disgust" (15-16). And in the condemnation of it he always repels Ruth's

closeness to his son. Thus directly or indirectly, it is Ruth's fixation for Milkman that in return perpetuates Macon's disgust for his son. On the other hand, Milkman too thinking his mother "as a frail woman content to do tiny things; to grow and cultivate small life that would not hurt her if it died" (64) has little value for Ruth's love and only once in his life he defends her from his father; it is also not for any love for her but to prove himself a man: "He was a man who saw another man hit a helpless person. And he had interfered . . . Isn't that what men did? (75). and as soon as Milkman learns about Ruth and Dr. Foster's unhealthy relationship from Macon, he begins to see her as an obscene person.

Pilate playing the role of Milkman's foster mother exhibits him the gravity and purity of familial love. Characterized by human love and liberty, Pilate is the most magnificent figure of the novel. Having no connectivity to her mother by umbilical cord as she "inched its way headfirst out of a still, silent . . . cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her" (*SOS* 28), her birth without navel and help is the proof of her being a woman of archetypal dimensions. However, the resentment of Pilate's birth, which brings with itself his wife's death, impels her father to name her after Christ-killer, Pilate. Pilate transcending the implications of enmity implied by her name comes up as the pilot "princely but protective" figure actually intended by her father when he fingered at it in the Bible (18). Though, the lack of mother figure deprives Pilate of the ecstasy of maternal warmth, her brother, Macon, nurtures her by acting as an alternative mother. Macon's love and care for Pilate shows her to be the loveliest object of the childhood: "the dearest thing in the world", "like his own child" (20, 27). Nevertheless, their conflict over what he misunderstood gold divided their paths. Karen Carmean admires Pilate's love for morality, which even transgresses her familial love: "Doubtless she recognizes that enforcement of her will is bound to cost her the affection of one person she loves in the world. Nevertheless, Pilate apparently feels her moral convictions more important than Macon's love" (55). Afterward, it is only Pilate who longs to shower love and affection upon Macon and tries to consort with him since the latter has only hatred for her. And when finally her granddaughter, Hagar, is born she is prompted to abandon her vagabond life and settle but not away from her brother.

Nevertheless, Pilate is a motherless child she herself grows into a strong mother who doting on her daughter and her daughter's daughter can go to extent to save them from injury. Suffused with strong love and compassion for the whole community, Pilate nurtures her daughter, Reba with a positive selfhood but fails to instill in her the toughness of the spirit, a traditional Afro-American value. Like Pilate, Reba too is an over-loving mother and can spend her whole life attending to her daughter, Hagar's interests, as she says, "We get you anything you want baby" (*SOS* 48). But in spite of being served with extreme love and care Hagar falls prey to self-destruction. To understand Hagar's dissolution it is necessary to view her individual response to their conditions of living. She lacks the positive values of her mother and grandmother implying first the absence of the male member in the family and the community for the healthy growth of a person and second her condition of dilemma; she is caught up between Pilate's primitivism and

stoicism and Reba's association with visual modes of commercialism and consumerism.

In fact, both Reba and Hagar are devoid of the self-assurance of Pilate. They can never learn the dauntless independence and the self-realizing vision of Pilate, which says that true love should be unselfish, caring and free. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison speaks:

Hagar does not have what Pilate had, which was a dozen years of a nurturing, good relationship with men. Pilate had a father, and she had a brother, who loved her very much, and she could use the knowledge of that love for her life. Her daughter Reba had less of that, but she certainly has at least a perfunctory adoration or love of men which she does not put to very good use. Hagar has even less because of the absence of any relationship with men in her life. (qtd. in Gates and Appiah 401)

Hagar is the frailest member of her family. She is neither daring like Pilate nor simple-hearted like Reba. However, she receives untrammelled maternal love, this excess of affection makes her unaccustomed to face refusals. She is plagued with frustration when she is rejected by Milkman. To Morrison for the colored girls like Hagar protection exists in the integrity of community: "She needed . . . a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girlfriends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her – and the humor with which to live it" (307). Love image of herself in the eyes of Pilate and Reba hardly instill in her self-worth. Gurleen Grewal too comments: "Even Pilate's rootedness and love are unable to shield Hagar from the devaluation of black identity" (70).

As such Hagar becomes Milkman's another convenient and exploitable ploy like his sisters Lena and Corinthians who has little sharing with him. The relationship among siblings is not of love rather the girls are obliged to obey him. Taking them granted for his services, Milkman, as a privileged male heir, wishes to see them – taking care of him, entertaining him and later following his orders. Demetrakopoulos suggests "They are a true, bitter, virulent portrait of what happens to sisters who are made subservient body-servants to a selfish, adored brother simply because he is a male" (qtd. in Bloom 51).

In adulthood, it is Corinthians, full name First Corinthians (a copy of biblical character in New Testament) who takes first to erode the impediments of psychological and patriarchal slavery. Though her job of "Michael-Mary Graham's amanuensis" is well below to her expectations, it helps her in learning responsibility and confidence (*SOS* 187). Her job also affords her to build love relationship with an agent of a secret company, Porter. Though, Porter is demeaning to her status enabling her to emerge from her "a doll baby" like existence, the relationship earns her self-respect; "In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new" (196, 201). It engenders her to challenge her father's pursuits of domination and discrimination. She shuns her false "moral and filial commitment" (195) and moves ahead to bond with a man, different in age and class true to the image of actual biblical character, First Corinthians. However, as soon as Milkman discovers the love relationship of his sister with an asocial figure, he raises remonstrance. He also tries to cease the affair by conveying the truth to his father. The moment allows Lena to express

her fury. Morrison shows how the expression of anger breaks the walls of repression and generates authentic self. Lena questions Milkman's right to interfere in their life. The agony resonates in her sound when she exclaims how prohibited to independence and self-sufficiency they are expected to act like the obtuse and deceased bodies. Lena's accusation introduces to Milkman his own imperfections propelling him to learn to respect and recognize his responsibilities.

Milkman is a loveless product of his parents' emotional estrangement and self-serving atmosphere. Owing to the fact that father wishes him to achieve his materialistic possessions and mother demands him to fulfill her unrequited requirements he can never acknowledge that true love is selfless and undemanding. It is only Pilate and her house which presents him an alternative love philosophy. Indeed, all the women at Pilate's home receive him with love and warmth: "He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; . . . surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him . . . And he was in love" (SOS 47). It is this place where he experiences a sparkle of love and emotions, though he has still to learn to love selflessly. Pilate pilots him on the path of love and tolerance through her own life experiences. A model of humanity endowed with the mammoth ability to love indifferently and selflessly, Pilate provides Milkman with his psychic rebirth.

Conclusion

In the context of familial love, thus Morrison has portrayed almost all possible familial dimensions such as mother-son, mother-daughter, father-son, father-daughter, foster mother and child and siblings in various shades imbued with numerous normal and subnormal findings as well as complexities. The novel also expresses Morrison's view on the role of the father's love in the growth of a child and the love of the child for the father. Father's love is presented both as a confused, sexually and emotionally devastating response and a strong self-formative value. Through the relationship between Milkman and Pilate and his subsequent intellectual and spiritual growth under her guardianship the novel as usually captures Morrison's special attention on mother-child relationship too.

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