
A Study of Alienation in Toni Morrison's Love: Poverty, Patriarchal Institution of Marriage and Female Friendship

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Abstract

This paper analyses the theme of mutual female bonding of black women in Toni Morrison's novel Love (2003). Sisterhood might be a weapon against alienation experienced by black women created by various factors as racial, gender and class injustices. However, this female friendship of black women in Morrison suffers a serious setback and changes into an alienated relationship in the long run because of powerful temptations under the canopy of the patriarchal structure of marriage and class strata. While highlighting the healing power of female companionship which may allow women to survive in the face of challenges and injustices, this study brings forth an argument that this female friendship is ultimately damaged by explicit or implicit patriarchal forces working under the platform of social institutions of marriage and class. Through this failed female friendship, Morrison warns her female readers to be on guard against the omnipresent fatal patriarchal forces in operation against them.

Keywords: Alienation, Sisterhood, Marriage, Black Women, Love

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Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) was a well-known fiction writer and the first African American writer who won Nobel Prize for literature. She had written ten novels. Her global fame is attributed not only to her presentation of the black issues, but also to the universal quality of her works. Critical studies dealing with her fiction reveal a vast range of critical standpoints and

theoretical outlooks namely: African American studies under racism, Marxist approaches underclass issue, comparative literary studies, and psychological investigations of her work. The current study brings into focus Morrison's novel Love published in 2003 for analyzing the themes of alienation and female friendship about the Poverty and Patriarchal implications of Marriage.

Alienation is an important subject in the discussion of modernist/postmodernist literary works, but the theme has been given insufficient consideration by critics. The writers as Homer, William Shakespeare, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Albert Camus have presented the theme of alienation in their works, and therefore alienation is a universal topic moving through different literary ages. This study brings into analysis Morrison's focus on the theme of alienation and her presentation of alienated characters in her novel *Love*. The researcher believes that the concept of alienation, truly analyzed in a certain framework in Toni Morrison's fiction, can give us vital insights about African Americans living in America. Alienation is an experience or the feeling of being an "alien" or detached from one's self, from others, from one's work and one's creations/products. Alienation is defined in different ways in different disciplines of knowledge and appears under different names such as estrangement, detachment and isolation. This study has been connected with the concepts of female friendship, poverty and marriage in black people in Morrison's novel *Love*.

Female friendship or woman companionship is a source of mutual support and assistance for one other beyond the concerns of self or family. It is an effort to assist and elevate each other in the time of crisis. It is a weapon against patriarchal forces as mentioned about women group struggle in "Veiled Courage: Inside the Women's Resistance against Violence Through

Their Writings" (Imran et al., 2020). Morrison is a writer who brings into limelight such a relationship in her writings such as *Sula*, *Love*, and *Paradise* where the women characters are shown making associations among themselves for mutual growth and moral support. Here this female friendship is being studied in Morrison's novel *Love* where this sisterhood is shown in facing new tensions and conflicts. The female friendship in this novel does not prove durable and invincible but is easily vulnerable to outside pressures, and thus suffers from crises of one kind or the other. The major factors that become a challenge for the sisterhood of black women in this novel and are analyzed here are poverty and the patriarchal institution of marriage.

Theoretical framework

Morrison brings fore various channels and associations in her fiction as possible strategies against various challenges created by patriarchal and other social forces, as Obioma Nnaemeka observes, "Works by black women writers also show that there are other channels, such as writing and sisterhood" (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 19). Here both writing and sisterhood are blended in Morrison's novel *Love* in connection with the theme of alienation in black women. Female bonding is very valuable in the views of female critics. Elizabeth Abel declares female friendship as a powerful connection that gives "form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each

other” (Abel, 1981, p. 434). But what is meant by female friendship? Firstly, it is a non-sexual connection based on caring and sharing. Clenora Hudson declares this relationship as a channel for “Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other” (Hudson, 2004, p. 65). This form of sisterhood usually” extends to female solidarity, which involves more women who benefit from this care and nurturing” (Kadidia Sy, 2008, p. 2). Many “critics highlight female friendship and women's solidarity” in African American literature (Dubek, 2001, p. 212) and Morrison's works have been discussed by critics in detail but not so much on the theme of alienation. This is bringing into analysis the theme of alienation in connection with female friendship, poverty and implicit patriarchal workings of the institution of marriage. Through this study, Morrison is being studied as a writer who seeks, through her writings, the survival of women as true human beings and freedom from patriarchal oppression by various means out of which one is the female friendship.

Morrison's texts bring fore the lives of the black women in America for highlighting various important issues such as the female friendship of black women. She highlights the complexities and intricacies of women relationships in black people in the American social context. The researcher is examining the black female friendship and the challenges it faces by analyzing a useful combination of characterization, settings and plot development of her

novel *Love*. Black women have been suffering from racial discrimination, but this issue is being studied here in link with the class issue as most black women are from the lower class, unfairly treated and appropriated in a patriarchal structure that oppresses women. The researcher brings into discussion various issues related to female friendship and social complexities by going into the psychological depths of the female characters in this novel.

Discussion

Love is the story of Bill Cosey, a dead hotel landlord, and all those people who are affected by his presence even after his death. Thus, the narrative of this novel has similarity to *Beloved* and *Jazz* as the communication is between living and dead. The dead Bill Cosey haunts the lives of characters just like *Beloved* in *Beloved* and *Dorcas* in *Jazz*. Cosey, at age of 52, marries Heed, an illiterate 11-year-old child who is a friend of his granddaughter, Christine. His daughter-in-law May, jealous of Heed, uses all her power to save her daughter, Christine, from Heed: Heed and Christine are good friends but became enemies because of this marriage. They grow hating each other and fight endlessly for Cosey's affection. He remains a bone of contention between them even after his death. Bill Cosey, the protagonist, has been dead for twenty-five years, but still, his absence is his presence for influencing the women in his circle. The friendship bond between Heed and Christine in *Love* is threatened by the

force of powerful patriarchy. Bill Cosey is not a passive patriarch in his role rather he exhibits an active and strong description of patriarchy. Cosey manipulates his status for ending the friendship of Christine and Heed, making Heed's parents agree for their younger in age daughter to marry an older man Cosey. He takes the unfair benefit of their being poor by compelling an eleven-year-old girl to marriage him. Through Cosey, Morrison highlights a highly effective "active" patriarchy and the system of oppression of the poor by the rich. What is at stake and ultimately destroyed, as an output of this marriage, is female friendship. Here the destructive force for female friendship is patriarchy working through the patriarchal institutions of class and marriage.

The novel is depicting the problems of society where wealth and power are sought to get respect in society. The myth of nationalism which is enchanted by the capitalists is also to be explored. The study is exploring the answers of the following questions: How class difference is a cause of pursuits of wealth and success at every cost by the people of lower classes? How capitalism is a cause of deterioration of moral values? Class difference is the outcome of capitalism, and it brings the concept of state with the national army, national games, national economy, national dressing and ironically national flowers and foods. This not only creates a gap between the nations of the world but also brings oppression in society. As a result of the progress and development

of capital, the gap between the haves and have not kept on widening. They capitalists rule the country and thus offer nothing to the workingclass people but an illusion of love of their nation. Marx's and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* explains in detail how ideals of capitalism corrupt the moral values of people. In his *Manifesto*, Marx points out "two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx and Engels, 2002, p 80). He further talks about the "Communitic revolution" as an output of this confrontation (ibid, p 120). The conflicts are the result of class struggle. The more the gap between the classes increases, the more conflicts arise. Capitalism provides a chance for the upper class to serve their own needs and thus the gap between the poor and the rich increases. This divide of the class also creates complex among the masses and the peace of the society gets ruined.

Love is a Marxist text highlighting the class issues in American society. The Marxist framework of class difference can easily be found out while discussing the social and cultural reality of America. The text captures the dark, drab and naked reality of America by focusing on the so-called shining economy of the country. The text of *Love* is a cultural study of different institutions of the society which are shaped into a variety of forms. It depicts the cultural, social and economic issues of society where people are suffering from extreme poverty. The high class is depressing the lower strata of society. The text is a

manifestation of Marxist point of view; description of the village, the animals and landlords are examples of behavior of aristocratic behavior of the people. The issue of class difference is not a new phenomenon but it is still a center of discussion in the text where society is divided into the rich business community and the laboring class. The research is significant in the sense that it will not just highlight the Marxist point of view of class difference in *Love* but also dig the root causes of it.

Here, Cosey's patriarchal influence over Christine and Heed is powerfully indicated. The destructive power of patriarchy not only destroys the friendship between the two girls but affects them even after Cosey's death. Marriage is the key factor here for the destruction of female bonding. As soon as Heed becomes Cosey's wife, their friendship changes into animosity. Furthermore, the class issue is responsible for this breakdown of friendship. Cosey uses the power to manage the affairs of Heed and Christine as he wishes to keep them alienated from each other. Portraying the way Cosey makes her parents agree to them for this marriage; Heed recalls the amount of deal that is "two hundred dollars" (Morrison, 2003, p.189). By bringing an eleven-year-old girl into a married relationship, Cosey the paedophile uncaringly watches the development of alienation in Christine and Heed and enjoys seeing them declaring war on each other. Cosey delineates a very powerful destructive propensity for surrounding himself with "needy, wild women" with his

seductive talk and wayward attention. Ullah et al highlight that the result of living in a dream world makes one alienated from the realities around (Ullah, Sami et al., 2020), so it becomes necessary that one becomes aware of the forces that bring alienation. One such dreamy world is the institution of marriage where the situation before marriage and after marriage is necessarily different. The thoughts of Mr. Cosey about women are mean and indicative of his sick mind about women. Mr. Cosey is talking about his son Billy and his marriage with a girl named May: "I used to wonder why he picked a woman like May to marry" (ibid, p.42). Thus, the women in Cosey's family are betrayed by Cosey: they wage war against each other for Cosey but he respects none of them in his life. The women could not succeed in heterosexual love nor sisterhood love.

Even though love is absent from *Love*, the title word is spoken only once by a living person. Like the ghosts haunting Morrison's fictional houses, however, love lingers in a distorted form. The central love is between the two child girls, Heed and Christine, and is destroyed by the marriage of Heed. "Love is the weather; Betrayal is the lightning that cleaves and reveals it" (Morrison, 2003). Morrison's work is a continuance of themes explored in her other fiction works. The foundational plots of Morrison's novels typically consist of African American characters that are in a continuous struggle to develop an identity in a world full of discriminations on the basis of race and

gender. The alienation in heterosexual love is a subject central to Morrison's works that demonstrate the need for a powerfully developed female relationship for women characters whose identities are devastated by their struggle in finding love for one another in the face of challenges of abandonment. However, the cycle continues and the estrangement in heterosexual love is replaced by the estrangement in sisterhood and female friendship. The lives of these characters are shaped by betrayals of various kinds. The problematic nature of the relationship among the different members of the Cosey family displays how strongly the destructive influence of patriarchy has exerted its influence upon women within the family structure.

Love exemplifies Morrison's investigation of African American female characters who have failed to surpass patriarchal oppression because their identities are intricately linked with the systems that suppress them. Heed, Christine and Junior are associated with each other in a triad friendship, but they are also associated with Bill Cosey in a system of sexism, racism, and classism that destroy their self-development and mutual associations. Before the introduction of characters, the narrator mentions that the women in this novel, passes through similar stories "about dragon daddies and false-hearted men," (Morrison, 2003, p. 4-5). Their families catch the trauma; they experience it and so depend on their sexuality to avoid the torturing feels of their disturbed

childhood.

In this novel, identity formation depends on heterosexuality. The women pursue Cosey as an agent of fulfilment of the desire to attain agency and power through misleading heterosexual affiliations. Aoi Mori asserts that Morrison formulates her female characters for the exploration of self-hood development "specifically African-American concerns". Morrison, Mori argues, presents her female figures as "subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival" (Mori, 1999, p. 29). Morrison's delineation of female characters in search for love, for right sexual interactions and for gaining a sense of worthiness as human beings are manifested in female characters of this novel Love.

Barbara Christian points out that a problem exists in the creation of an "idealized African American family" and "the actual hard struggle within such a family" (Christian, 2007, p. 127). Bill Cosey deals with his family in a way that he becomes the major paternal figure who is the provider of material wealth to his family as compensation for the lack of affection or love from his side. Through the exploration of the psychological aspects of the women in this novel, Morrison gives a lesson to the readers to see how the system of oppression affects the growth of a female individual. The resultant estrangement in female friendship in this novel has its roots in the feelings of abandonment experienced by each female member of

the family unit. In this novel, the link between class subjugation and the spoiling nature of marriage on women is very much evident. Thinking that Cosey will be a continuous source of money for them, her parents agree to give a sacrifice of Heed, but they get to know that Cosey would not give them anything after the accomplishment of the task.

Besides, the giving of Heed to Cosey by her mother shows the existence of an alienated mother-daughter relationship. Like Nel and Sula in *Sula*, Heed and Christine are left to themselves because of the inattention of their mothers as they do not have much time for caring for their daughters. Like Nel and Sula, Heed's character highlights that "the parents should not fail in fostering daughters" (Ahmad, S. et al, 2020, p.120). This lack of mother-daughter care makes these daughters defenseless and thus they form a mutual bond in to fill that gap of mother-daughter love. Thus, this novel highlights how the problematic mother-daughter relationship produces a negative impact on these daughters. Meanwhile, Christine also proves a failure in understanding that it is Cosey and his representation in the patriarchal institution of marriage and class that terminate her friendship with Heed. Struggling with her friend seems to be easier for Christine than challenging the patriarch Cosey, especially because she has a hope of inheriting someday her grandfather's treasure. It is this skirmish for wealth that eventually averts any kind of reconciliation between Christine and Heed.

If the epiphany in *Sula* occurs twenty-five years after Sula's death in *Sula*, it does not occur to Christine and Heed, even long after the death of the agent of their oppression. When reconciliation lastly occurs for Christine and Heed, it happens under desperate circumstances and is too late to produce any fruitful result. Heed dies after her strong hostility with Christine. Then there occurs a partial reconciliation and for the first time since Heed's marriage, they come to understand Cosey's responsibility for their alienation from each other, as Christine responds, "We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere" (Morrison, 2003, p. 189). But this understanding comes too late, "He took all my childhood away from me, girl" (ibid, p. 194). As in *Sula* Morrison brings forth a final moment of reconciliation but very much late as the friendship between the women could not be saved in time for their mutual growth and development. Morrison dramatizes the possibility of clearing up differences but meanwhile makes it clear that this possibility is not easily ready. Morrison's novel suggests that living under the influence of patriarchal institutions may delay, prevent or stop sisterhood. Although Morrison herself seems to be a full supporter of female friendship, she does not bring fore the example of a fruitful sisterhood. Rather, Morrison exemplifies failed female friendship strongly affected by the patriarchal power structure. Like in *Sula*, in this novel *Love*, patriarchy is shown very much effective that breaks up female bonds making women

detached and estranged from each other.

The apparent unity at the end of the novel seems unauthentic due to the final dysfunction of the triad. Junior, a member of this triad, is a significant character in *Love*. She is only 11 years old when she goes away from “the Settlement,” and after continuous struggle for years, she is hired by Heed to compose the past story of the Cosey’s family. Junior’s abandonment of Heed and Christine and the ambiguity of Junior’s fate suggest open-endedness in this novel. Unity only occurs between the two older women, demonstrating that Junior has not understood the significance of female bonding as she chooses her relationship with her “Good Man” over Heed and Christine. Jean Wyatt points out that Morrison’s main purpose behind such stories is “to expose the male-centered norms of love stories” (Wyatt, 2017, p. 104). Junior becomes a dual function doing a character. She is an agent of unity between Heed and Christine, but she also spoils the unity within the triad. These are her actions that cause Heed’s death. This ending shows that the problem prevalent in the sixties as the reliance on patriarchal values is still affecting women today. The women should have focused on homosocial bonds among them in solidarity with each other to shatter the damaging effects of heterosexual relationships and dangerous patriarchal influences and values.

Conclusions

Morrison points out the difficulties that bring the failure of this friendship. The major factors are self-centeredness and material motives along with the patriarchal institution of marriage and class exploitation. Throughout her fiction, Morrison makes it clear that female bonding is most indispensable for black women to combat the negative impact of discrimination based on race and class differences. However, the peculiarity of Morrison is that she goes on to tell her black readers that this female bonding is not an easy-going relationship. Though female friendship heals to varying degrees of wounds resulting from patriarchal forces and secures women’s survival, it faces challenges that threaten its accomplishments. Besides patriarchal structures, problems as self-centeredness, failure to handle differences and unconscious psychological drives as mother hunger, threaten the stability of female friendship which may change into an alienated relationship. This situation presents a challenging picture of women fighting for their deliverance from the alienation caused by the patriarchal forces.

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