

A Study on Feminism in the Works of Toni Morrison

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Abstract – Female bonding draws the attention of some theorists who analyze and examine women's relationships and the different challenges facing them. Toni Morrison studied women's identities and relationships and their impact in the community. They analyze women's experiences related to race, class and gender, and how women develop strategies that allow them to survive. They foreground how black women connect in order not only to heal the pain resulting from these misfortunes but also to provide themselves with comfort and security.

Morrison reflects, In developing a theory of female friendship, I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each other.

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INTRODUCTION

Morrison raises an important point concerning the need to highlight the struggles of women to be out of reach of oppression, secure their own survival and fight their subjugation by patriarchal structures. Bonnie Thornton Dill state, —The experiences of racial oppression made Black women strongly aware of their group identity and consequently more suspicious of women who, initially at least, defined much of their feminism in personal and individualistic terms.

In other words, the foundation of these identities explains the different standpoints that women from different cultural backgrounds have about feminism. Writing about black women, Morrison points out that —Their bonding renders one sure way of bringing about ultimate success, for the sharing of one's life experiences often gives what is needed for that success. Hence, where there is a coming together of body, mind, and spirit, there is victory. The mutual support and sharing provide an opportunity to learn, grow and take advantage of the exchange. Learning not only from one's mistakes but from other women's as well presents a real chance of success.

Like Abel, Morrison also studies sisterhood and considers it to be one of the characteristics of Africana womanism,⁴ a concept she theorizes and prefers to the term feminism in the sense that it involves realities concerning women of African descent, reflecting their entanglement in racial, class and gender systems. She

sees *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on Africana womanism mainly because of the novel's focus on female friendship.

Of the protagonist, he insists, —Ramatoulaye embodies many characteristics of the true Africana womanist, the most obvious ones being genuine in sisterhood, strong, self-defined, demanding of respect, family centered, male compatible, authentic, whole, mothering, and nurturing. Hudson-Weems considers the friendship at the core of the novel, between the characters Ramatoulaye and Aissatou - to be a prototype of female solidarity and an example to be followed by Africana women.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent the true nature of female solidarity in the sense that they strive to cultivate and nurture a sisterhood that allows them to care for one another as well as provide and render moral and material support. Each helps the other in difficult times and encourages her to make positive changes that allow her to face the challenges of polygamy and patriarchy in general. Because they go through similar experiences, they understand and empathize with each other.

Aissatou understands Ramatoulaye's pain because she has lived almost the same problem. She knows that her friend is going through the suffering with which she had to cope when her husband took a second wife. Victims of the system of polygamy, they join forces and comfort each other. Thus, friendship

gives them an opportunity to strengthen their connection and ease the pain of betrayal. Betty Taylor Thompson joins Hudson-Weems in characterizing *So Long a Letter* as an Africana womanist novel: The protagonist continues to long for a family centered existence and for a loving companion. In fact, she misses her husband even though he has rudely cast her outside.

Notably, according to the postulates defined as characteristic of Africana women, there is the desire to have fulfilling relationships with Africana men, contrasting with the feminists' desire to free themselves entirely from male influence.

Ramatoulaye's willingness to tolerate polygamy and her accommodating views about men's and women's relationships explains the different stand of feminism she adopts from that of her friend, Aissatou. Although she believes in women's emancipation, she also takes a serious consideration of African traditional values that do not always match feminist standpoints. Hudson-Weems notes, Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for they would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs.

FEMINISM IN THE WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

Morrison's rising rhetoric is unrealistic, of course: it would take a miracle for all women to be friends. The expectations placed on female solidarity are high; some women may believe in the project and commit themselves to reaching out and helping other women, but others may not. Hudson-Weems' optimism not only secures women's well-being but their children's as well. She is inspired by the African proverb that states that it takes a village to raise a child, asserting that female friendship may also assure family security as a whole. Although Hudson-Weems theorizes Africana womanism, not all black diasporic women have adopted the concept; this split actually creates a polemic among black scholars. Hudson-Weems argues that feminism is primarily a white women's movement that does not take into account black women's experiences.

Morrison pointed out the weaknesses in Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism. The 6 culture mean that, overall, U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. Morrison, Bâ and Atta encourage serious and mutual commitment between black women in order to heal wounds linked to oppression related to race, class and patriarchal constraint. Morrison states, —Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves.

The feeling of solidarity usually urges women to call each other sister in the African American community. It entails more emphasis on the community and less on individual selves, and this group-oriented view represents a good opportunity for black women to form strong bonds. Female friendship is a non-sexual relationship between women based on giving and receiving emotional and moral support, sharing stories and experiences, caring and nurturing each other. This form of relationship may occur between any women and does not necessarily involve sibling or mother-daughter relationships.

Morrison defines such a bonding: This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood.

Women friends provide for each other dependability that goes beyond the concern for self and aims at reaching out to sisters in an attempt to help and elevate them. Morrison describes this form of relationships during girlhood years in both *Sula* and *Love*, as characters build successful bonds during their childhood. In fact, in *Sula*, Nel and Sula build a rare form of bonding that allows them to grow and develop identities; in the same way, in *Love*, Christine and Heed use their friendship to fill in gaps in their lives. However, sisterhood stops with childhood in Morrison's novels and gives way to tensions and conflicts. Morrison clearly distinguishes childhood from adult friendships by the solidarity that characterizes the first and the problems that make the second fail. Childhood friendships are more successful in Morrison's novels than adulthood bonding because self-centeredness becomes a larger issue as children grow up. As an epistolary novel that consists of serious exchanges, sharing of experiences and mutual counseling, *So Long a Letter* foregrounds the nurturing bonding that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou strive to build and maintain. Commenting on this relationship, Hudson-Weems asserts, —The kind of friendship these women have goes beyond confiding in one another and sharing commonalities. Not only do they share their feelings, they share material things as well.

Atta also raises the issue of sisterhood in *Everything Good Will Come*, in which Enitan Taiwo and Sherifat Bakare use their friendship to fight insecurities during their girlhood and assure their safety and survival while facing political instability and male chauvinism. This bonding helps them build and strengthen their self-esteem. These women friends can share stories support each other, or just sit down to talk. In their fiction, Morrison, Bâ and Atta present ordinary women. These women form bonds; they may not even believe in feminist principles, but

their experiences or environment urge them toward female solidarity. In exploring the social and psychological contexts and implications of friendships, these texts contribute to an understanding of African and African American women. Collins reflects, For African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African-American women within the group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others.

Collins invites black women intellectuals to recognize the various ways of producing knowledge about African American women. Moreover, issues like individual feeling call not only for what Collins names—critical social theory¹¹ but also literary criticism. Serious reflection on experiences may take various forms, including prose and poetry. Literature typically presents the complexities of human relationships and social experiences by exploring the social and psychological aspects of human life. Through a careful combination of characters, settings and contexts, literature engages in examining complex relationships in different plots. This dissertation will use characterization and plot analysis to examine the significance of female friendship and the different challenges it faces. Since to some degree literature mirrors life, black women writers may be understood to present at least, in a structural or generalized imaginary sense, the identities of black diasporic women throughout their texts.

Writing becomes another form of coalition that eliminates borders and focuses mainly on what unites these women. Commenting on this solidarity, Davies states, —The reality of imperialism mandates specific anti-imperialist alliances and discourses that eschew the trap of prescribed local/national/identity boundaries. Black women writers make connections and use their writing to sensitize people about their identities.⁶ This attempt at unity expresses a strong opposition to the —divide and rule¹⁷ system of the colonizer. With reference to black women's writings, Nnaemeka argues, —The texts discuss women's solidarity as an issue of survival; solidarity among women offers a safety net and a breath of fresh air in a suffocating, constraining environment.

DISCUSSION

Black women often The hard economic situation of black women transforms them into second-class citizens, and female friendship can conceivably function as a refuge where they can find comfort and security and heal the wounds resulting from prejudice. In Love, however, using his authority and influence to

blackmail a poor, working class family into letting him marry their eleven-year-old daughter, Cosey demonstrates the power of a higher-class status and highlights the frailty of the lower class. Through this marriage, Cosey manages to put an end to the friendship that Christine, his granddaughter, and Heed, his would-be wife, strive to build.

In other words, sisterhood falls victim to class through the figure of Cosey. Likewise, in *Sula*, the joined forces of race and class pose a threat to female friendship and are a major cause of its failure. Indeed, the combined effects of race and class push Jude, Nel's husband, into another patriarchal institution, marriage, which also fails to redeem his damaged manhood. A victim of prejudice, he, in return, becomes a passive agent of patriarchy and puts a definite end to the friendship between Nel and Sula.

The racial and class oppression that black women experience make them likely to live in the same neighborhoods, go to the same schools and hold the same sort of domestic jobs. Their precarious economic situation condemns them to live in areas they can afford, enroll their children in public schools and find low-paid jobs to secure their survival. Their proximity also allows them to build coalitions that work for the benefit of the community. Collins argues, The heavy concentration of U.S. Black women in domestic work coupled with racial segregation in housing and schools meant that U.S. Black women had common organizational networks that enabled them to share experiences and construct a collective body of wisdom. This collective wisdom on how to survive as U.S. Black women constituted a distinctive Black women's standpoint on gender-specific patterns of racial segregation and its accompanying economic penalties. (24) ¹¹ The realities Collins describes affect *Sula* and *Nel*, who attend the same school and grow up in the same neighborhood.

Having to live in the Bottom,⁸ a community named from a joke about a master tricking his slave into accepting a hilly land, they form bonds. This bonding allows them to fight against the impact of patriarchal oppression and helps them heal their common wounds. Collins adds, —Whereas racial segregation was designed to keep U.S. Blacks oppressed, it fostered a form of racial solidarity that flourished in all-Black neighborhoods. In contrast, now that Blacks live in economically heterogeneous neighborhoods, achieving the same racial solidarity raises new challenges.

Ironically, having to live in oppressive conditions can enable black women to form bonds and cultivate female solidarity in order to survive. Other forms of connections exist that may involve two or more women who care and nurture each other. For instance, in Africa, women's associations⁹ work primarily to provide economic freedom to women.

Through these organizations, and the necessity to plan and work together for the success of their projects, women create solid ties and cultivate a rare form of female solidarity. Bound by the same goals, they realize that they have to work in unity, peace and harmony in order to achieve their dreams. This collective commitment to the same objective results in a strong sisterhood that benefits not only the women themselves but also the community as a whole.

Conscious of challenges, these women know that in order to improve their conditions they need to have access to economic power; therefore, they join together and build female solidarity in an attempt to improve their conditions and achieve financial freedom. Oyeronde Oyewumi states, Because of the strong sense of community and the fact that individual experience could best be realized in a group, formal organizations became a way of life. Besides kinship organizations, age trades, occupational guilds, and religious, social, and political organizations are all features of African community life.

In Yorubaland as one case, associations were called *egbe*, which also means peer group. Members of a convivial *egbe* referred to each other as *oore-friend*. This form of female friendship works well because in addition to caring and nurturing, the material aspect keeps relationships strong and eliminates or minimizes financial dependence on men. These organizations are very important in Africa where the economic context requires that women participate efficiently in the struggle for development.

CONCLUSION

Morrison demonstrates the significance of these organizations in her depiction of beneficial involvement in them by Ramatoulaye and her daughter, Daba. Atta also presents a form of organization through the Bakare family. Facing economic hardships after her father's death, Sheri starts a catering business that involves her stepmothers, sisters, sisters-in-law and herself. This activity offers the Bakare women economic independence and an opportunity to cultivate female solidarity. In addition to bonds formed through organizations, in certain African communities sisterhood relates to co-mothering.

Because motherhood is very important in African society, sisterhood evolves around co-mothering as women exchange their experiences and share secrets of childcare. This form of solidarity does not concern only blood mothers but all female members of the clan or village who participate in the upbringing and well being of all children. This task usually goes beyond childcare and extends to the women themselves. This expression of female solidarity offers wisdom to the younger women and creates solid ties. Morrison argues, —In many African societies, there is no sisterhood without motherhood. The most profound sisterly relations are to be found in co-mothering, which is the essence of community building. Co-

mothering as a communal ideal and social practice is not reducible to biological motherhood, it transcends it.

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