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**Hostility and Solidarity: Female Homosociality in the Fiction of Toni  
Morrison**

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2014

## Table of Contents

Statement of Copyright	ii
Acknowledgment	iii
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One</b> <b>Friendship and Age: Homosexuality in Toni Morrison's <i>Sula</i> and <i>Jazz</i></b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter Two</b> <b>Revolving Around Men: Patriarchy and Women's Identity in <i>Song of Solomon</i> and <i>Love</i></b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Chapter Three</b> <b>Female Homosexuality and the Impact of Slavery in <i>Beloved</i> and <i>A Mercy</i></b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Chapter Four</b> <b>Collective Female Bonding in <i>Paradise</i>: Reviving Hurt Women</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>261</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>265</b>

## **Statement of Copyright**

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## Introduction

The term female homosociality refers to all kinds of female bonding and relationships such as those between mothers and daughters, sisters, female friends, female classmates, female colleagues, lesbians etc. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her groundbreaking book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* defines homosociality broadly as a term occasionally used in the study of history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex.<sup>1</sup> Sedgwick continues by explaining her choice of terms for the subtitle, *Male Homosocial Desire*: her intention in selecting the word ‘desire’ over ‘love’ is to discuss a structure and not a particular emotion. She also writes that she employs the combination of desire and homosociality: ‘not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes important relationships’ (2). Borrowing the term homosociality from Sedgwick, I will use it hereafter in this thesis to indicate a form of cohesive social relation, including two sides of solidarity and hostility, which brings women together.

Although Sedgwick’s main focus is upon male relations she also comments on female homosociality, stating

It seems at this moment to make an obvious kind of sense to say that women in

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 2.



our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities (2–3).

When one considers female to female bonding, the first thing which comes to mind is perhaps lesbianism and sexual relationships among women, but as Sedgwick correctly points out, any common activity which helps women support each other can be regarded as a manifestation of female bonding. According to her, homosociality and homosexuality are distinct entities, although they may also overlap. She writes, ‘the adjective “homosocial” as applied to women’s bonds [...] need not be pointedly dichotomized as against “homosexual”; it can intelligibly denominate the entire continuum’ (3). Sedgwick’s definition and ideas are an influential source of inspiration for this thesis. Having studied the fictions of African American writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor among others, I observed the fact that female friendship and female homosociality are prominent and pervasive in most of these works. This notion seems especially pronounced in Morrison’s novels which will form the main focus of my thesis.

In a formative interview with Morrison, Sandi Russell points out

Toni Morrison wanted to capture the relationship that black women have historically shared with one another. In Afro-American culture, and in the black church, sisterhood has a larger meaning than that of contemporary usage. “The term Sister,” Toni explains, “has a deep old meaning – it was valid, never

secondary. Black women had to be real and genuine to each other, there was no one else".<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to revitalize the historical meaning of sisterhood among black women, Morrison shows interest in female bonding in most of her works. She explores an expansive and loose definition of the term, in order to stimulate the reader to delve into the significance of female homosociality as a potential source of power in the face of patriarchy for women. In her own words she tells Nellie McKay why she has portrayed female friendship in all of her books:

because the world knows that women don't choose each other's acquaintanceship. They choose men first, then women as second choice. But I have made women the focal point of books in order to find out what women's friendships are really all about.<sup>3</sup>

The main objective of this study can be described as identifying different manifestations of female bonding in Morrison's novels and drawing out the wider consequences of such relationships among female characters for their lives, communities and self understandings. While the terms sisterhood and bonding may tend to have positive associations, by investigating broader 'homosociality' my thesis is able to also highlight and explore Morrison's repeated engagement with damaged and/or damaging female units and relations.

Examining important scholarship on Morrison's fiction, I identified a lack of criticism encompassing of the wide variety of female bonds found in the majority of Morrison's works,

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<sup>2</sup> Sandi Russell, 'It's OK to Say OK', in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, Mass.: Hall, 1988), pp. 43-47, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Nellie McKay, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison', *Contemporary Literature*, 24/4 (1983), 413-29, p. 428.

including her most recent novels. Most critics either focus on the primary mother-daughter relationship or on selected prominent friendships in the early novels.<sup>4</sup> I will explore Morrison's works with a larger scope to include all kinds of female-female relationship, friendly and hostile, and the underlying causes behind the formation of such homosociality. I will take a broadly feminist approach and, in particular, will draw on critical studies that have looked at homosociality and on black feminist theory.<sup>5</sup> My main focus will be seeking answers to the following questions: why is Morrison preoccupied with female connection in her fiction and to what extent does she offer a unique outlook on it in each work? What part is it shown to play in processes of self-actualization and resistant gender politics? How do male figures fit into this picture and what purpose is served by recurrent portrayals of them as barriers to the formation of female homosociality? How does the reading of female-female bonding relate to and inform the depiction of heterosexual relationships? How do the narratives work and interact with such thematic and political concerns? This thesis will hence attempt to add to and expand on existing scholarship on Morrison, offering a more comprehensive examination of female homosociality in seven of her novels.

In Toni Morrison's novels such as *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon* the recurring image of a household in which a female is the head of the family reinforces the author's interest in bonding among female characters. In *Paradise*, the female utopia of the Convent is outside the patriarchal community and is co-operatively inhabited by women from different backgrounds. Despite all of their differences, they have one unique characteristic in common:

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Andrea O'Reilly has contributed valuable work on motherhood and mother daughter relationships while scholarship on Morrison's second novel *Sula* focuses heavily on the young friendship between Sula and Nel.

<sup>5</sup> Critics like bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Patricia Hill Collins who have done groundbreaking work on black women's position and identities will be a frequent source of reference.

they have escaped male domination and yet, quite ironically, their paradise is eventually interrupted and annihilated by a male force. Notwithstanding the fact that in *Love* all the female characters are initially defined in terms of their relationship to a man, the relationships among the women emerge as significant. In general, in her novels Morrison puts much more emphasis on her female characters and their ties; male characters are often dead, intruders, or in the background. Thus the relationships between women and both positive and negative forms of female homosociality will be underscored and investigated in this study. As will be shown, critical depictions of female homosociality, which might seem odd at first glance given the common connotations of support and nurture, add to Morrison's picture of patriarchy's influence, the impact of racial hierarchy and the complexities of women's capacity to hurt or limit one another.

My first chapter is entitled 'Friendship and Age: Homosociality in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Jazz*'. In this chapter *Sula* (1973), one of Morrison's early novels, is considered alongside the later *Jazz* (1992). It will explore how, in these texts, pairs of young girls are introduced whose friendship is intruded on and terminated by a male presence. Yet in both of these works, Morrison also depicts all-female households and supportive and healing relationships among women.

As much criticism has highlighted, *Sula* centralises the stories of two girls in their childhood and early stages of adulthood. I will suggest that Morrison poses their childhood friendship as a kind of substitute for limited mother-daughter relationships, shaped by hardship and social orders. The marriage of Nel is shown to disrupt their homosocial bond, meaning that the value of their mutual support and love goes unrecognized until the novel's close. In *Jazz*, Morrison again features young women whose friendship is breached by a male

force. While this novel, set in Harlem following the disruption of the Great Migration, foregrounds a marriage in crisis, I argue that multiple subplots allow the parallel development of transformative bonding between a pair of older women and surrogate mother-daughter nurturance. My comparative approach will show both continuities and changes in the author's engagement with female homosociality between her early and later fiction. The endings of *Sula* and *Jazz* reinforce that, although she exposes difficult, problematic relations between female characters, Morrison shapes a narrative logic that seeks to devalue patriarchy and promote the worth of investment in bonds among women.

My second chapter, 'Revolving Around Men: Patriarchy and Women's Identity in *Song of Solomon* and *Love*', pairs together two novels that apparently revolve around a man, depicting female characters whose lives and identities are based on their connections to specific privileged male characters. Morrison chooses a male character for her third novel's protagonist and this shows a shift in her writing. Her first two novels were full of female characters and were innovatively female centred. Yet in *Song of Solomon* (1977) Morrison focuses on Milkman's mid-twentieth-century journey to self-definition and creates a set of 'peripheral' women around this young man. My readings in this chapter, unlike most of the criticism on the novel, seek to unravel the complex relationships of these women to Milkman and to each other. Interestingly, a similar focus and pattern can be found in the later *Love* (2003). Twenty-five years on, Morrison returns to the same structure of relations to emphasise how patriarchy can define a woman's being and to elaborate how women can remain economically and/or emotionally dependent on men. While in these two novels even strong independent female characters are revealed as placing value in a logic shaped by male

dominance, I argue that a late narrative twist in *Love* allows for a reevaluation of the worth of female homosociality.

My third chapter is entitled 'Female Homosociality and the Impact of Slavery in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*'. It will explore how two of Morrison's historical novels introduce the institution of slavery as a destructive element for female homosociality, especially impacting on mother-daughter relationships. Threads of connection from the groundbreaking *Beloved* (1987) to the recent *A Mercy* (2008) will be traced.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison chooses a distinctive setting in colonial America, moving back further in history than she has previously. One part of her multi-threaded narrative explores the experiences of a young European woman who migrates to the New World where slavery is at the early stages of formation. There she encounters a multi-racial cast of women who all have come to live and work on the same Northern farm through the choices and power of Jacob Vaark, the landowner. My main focus in examining *A Mercy* will be the bonds and divisions within the community of women, especially a shift from solidarity to hostility when personal and economic relations change upon the death of Jacob. A second line of enquiry will be the direct, damaging influence of slavery on mother-daughter relationships as the main character, Florens, is a slave girl separated from her family on moving to work for Jacob Vaark.

Morrison's critically acclaimed *Beloved* also revisits the damaging impact of slavery on the mother-daughter relationship, this time offering the Reconstruction-era struggles of African Americans haunted by a Southern slave past. Looking at this novel, I will explore how Morrison draws attention to the aftermath and internalisation of slavery's racial logic, which is still ruining households, family bonds and loving connections a decade after the

Civil War. Here Morrison again shows interest in, and plays out, both constructive and destructive female homosocial relationships.

My final chapter, 'Collective Female Bonding in *Paradise*: Reviving Hurt Women', focuses on just one novel. In *Paradise* (1997) Morrison gives a central and explicit portrayal of female homosociality, indeed of homosocial community, and my thesis's organisation reflects this emphasis. Morrison ironically names this novel *Paradise*, referring to both the dystopian all black town of Ruby and the neighbouring isolated Convent in which a group of women gather together to heal the wounds inflicted by the patriarchy still operating in wider mid-twentieth-century America. My approach will encompass the individual stories of women from the town and the Convent, exploring how Morrison's wide-scale narrative works to affirm nurturing bonds and critique the values and violence that disrupt them. Both friendship connections and mother-daughter relationships will be examined. I will suggest that Morrison sometimes presents non-familial homosociality as being able to replace and compensate for distorted or lost female family bonds. In *Paradise* Morrison shows how a supremacist society does not permit women their own space, while at the same time she offers the Convent as a temporary refuge from patriarchal definitions and a self-conscious model of homosocial possibility.

## **Theoretical and Critical Frameworks**

### **Feminism and Homosociality**

A helpful body of feminist work has considered relations between women and their significance in contexts of gender hierarchy and/or racism. bell hooks in her 1986 article

‘Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,’ sums up the damage done to female connections in patriarchal society:

Women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression. As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood.<sup>6</sup>

hooks considers sexism as the most important retarding factor, which not only hinders the formation of sustaining female friendship, but also forces women to rank their homosocial bonding below highly valued heterosexual and male-female family relationships. hooks also highlights the point that the conformity of women, as a victimized group, leads to further oppressive limitation within society and individual lives. She believes that it is not only the patriarchal values forced upon women which impede the formation of female bonding, but

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<sup>6</sup> bell hooks, ‘Political Solidarity Between Women’, *Feminist Review*, 23 (1986), 125-138, p. 127.



also women's ongoing conformity to such values, which can act as a barrier to a rich experience of female connection. Her suggestion is that to 'build a sustained feminist movement' and to enjoy solidarity, women should free themselves from the supremacist rules that have been taught to them over the years. The degrading of connections between women and views of women as their own worst enemies need to be 'unlearned' according to hooks. As we will see, this idea is echoed in Toni Morrison's *Love* where women live under the same roof but are hostile and distrustful towards each other for the sake of the legacies of a patriarch. hooks, here, echoes Janice Raymond's definition of 'prime order' which I will turn to later in this part.

hooks further complicates her picture of female homosociality by thinking about other social stratifications and ways by which to regain positive female bonds. She considers at least three obstacles which retard the formation of sisterhood:

Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. Divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reverie about common oppression despite the value of highlighting experiences all women share (127).

Here she condemns established patriarchal conventions and obstacles to female friendship and homosociality. Male supremacy and race and class discrimination are the most highlighted barriers, also featuring in the writings of other black thinkers of the same era. For instance,

Alice Walker, who wrote of her influential concept of womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* in 1983, also in that book regarded racism, sexism and colorism as retarding elements preventing the formation of a positive female bonding<sup>7</sup>. As I will explore later, in Morrison's *Paradise* the women from the Convent and the town of Ruby are unable to form effective solidarity as many yield to the patriarchal norms of their community. Likewise, in *A Mercy*, the union between Rebekka and Lina breaks down when, after Jacob's death, the European woman starts to conform to the established norms of her society out of fear of losing her position. hooks points out that differences between the experiences and positions of women cannot be ignored in efforts to forge solidarity.

In a more recent publication, hooks writes:

Many abiding romantic friendships between women are broken when one of the individuals finds a mate or marries. This is especially the case when an individual woman does not have a feminist consciousness. Through feminist conversion many of us learned to place as much value on our bonds with women friends as we place on partnerships with males, to value our nonsexual bonds with male friends as much as we value those in which we are sexual. That consciousness-raising must continually take place as long as patriarchy exists, for it teaches girls and women to value fully our bonds with one another, to value all deep bonds equally.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: Alice Walker, 'The Black Writer and the Southern Experience', in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 15–21.

<sup>8</sup> bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), p. 209.

Whereas in 1986, hooks was focused on patriarchy and gave most emphasis to forging female social and political sisterhood over and above heterosexual relationships, by 2002 her preoccupations have broadened. In light of the reformations brought about by feminism in the late twentieth century, she still critiques the damaging elevation of heterosexual unions but now affirms a wider range of bonds, for example valuing female-male nonsexual relationships.

Further, she comments in her 1986 article

Women are enriched when we bond with one another but we cannot develop sustaining ties or political solidarity using the model of Sisterhood created by bourgeois women's liberationists. According to their analysis, the basis for bonding was shared victimization, hence the emphasis on common oppression. This concept of bonding directly reflects male supremacist thinking. Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim (128).

Reflecting a period of pluralisation and contestation within feminist discourse, bell hooks, seeks to distinguish her notion of sisterhood from that articulated and advocated by white, bourgeois feminists, too often presented as universal. Perhaps she shares the idea of womanism identified by Alice Walker who, while condemning feminism for ignoring black women and their rights, had coined a specific term for black feminism. Also, in *Ain't I a Woman*, hooks gives a detailed history of how and why middle-class white Feminism, through its failings, motivated the emergence of Black Feminism. Turning back in time, she outlines

two parallel social movements in the 1860s: the early Women's Rights Movement, which mainly supported the rights of privileged white women, and the struggle for recognition of black rights after the Civil War, which pushed for the right to vote for black men. At that time, black women's rights were not on the agenda. She writes:

Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice. The more radical black women activists demanded that black men and all women be given the vote.<sup>9</sup>

hooks argues that white feminism not only neglected the rights of black women within American society but also contributed to discourses of them as less feeling and as able to endure greater hardship due to their 'unfeminine' physical strength. Black women, on the other side, could not rally only for black male suffrage since they acknowledged that it would result in establishing black patriarchy and male dominance over them. They 'found themselves in limbo, not wanting to ally themselves with sexist black men or racist white women' (9). hooks views this moment as significant for black women recognising the need to fight for their own rights, anticipating Black Feminism's break with mainstream feminism in the late twentieth-century Second Wave.

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<sup>9</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981) p. 3.

From problematising shared narratives of victimization, hooks in her later book *Communion*, turns to dwell on a positive, sustaining vision:

If women of all ages freely embrace the term “romantic friendship,” we will open up the space where we can develop primary bonds in platonic relationships that are constant, committed, and able to last a lifetime. These relationships ensure that the woman who does not find a perfect mate will still know true and abiding love. And at the end of the day it is this love that sustains us and gives life meaning (217).

Here her standpoint is no longer as concerned with racial stratification or with hierarchies perpetuated within the women’s movement. This might be because of the changes womanism has brought into the awareness and debates of feminism. Here hooks talks about the value of a platonic female love for those women who fail to find ‘a perfect mate’ whereas in her earlier writings the male-female sexual relationship was more comprehensively regarded as oppressive and therefore loveless. It now seems there is a possibility of a positive heterosexual relationship in hooks’ thinking.

Developing these concerns, it is worth considering Alice Walker’s ‘womanism’, a concept which distinguished black feminism from white feminism. For her a womanist is

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men sexually or nonsexually (xi).

Based on Walker's definition, any woman who values women's characteristics and establishes strong female connections, sexually or non-sexually, can be considered a womanist. She does not exclude male-female relationships totally from her definition, nor class them all as oppressive. At the same time, the primary relationship which elaborates Walker's definition of womanism best is a female-female relationship. Alice Walker can be regarded as influential in developments beyond Second Wave feminism and many other black thinkers subsequently drew on and refined her notion of womanism. They took inspiration from her term in criticizing white feminism and calling for a feminism encompassing their specific experiences, identities and rights as well.

In more recent feminist commentary, the idea of 'primacy' is emphasized; this is significant for my own work on female homosociality. In the words of Janice G. Raymond, 'Women who are primary to one another put each other first: first in the order of importance; first in claims of attention, affection and activity; first in not allowing men to interfere with or encroach on female friendship'.<sup>10</sup> As Raymond discusses the importance of female friendship, she advocates a prime order in female bonding. In prime order women should not sacrifice their homosociality for heterosociality or heterosexuality. They should not allow patriarchal values to determine their bonding as secondary and should try not to yield to the fabricated historical notion that women are women's enemies and rivals.

Raymond continues:

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<sup>10</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex, 2001), p. 35.

The origins of female friendship are in female freedom, an important aspect of which is the freedom to be for women. It is important to a genealogy of female friendship that women claim this freedom to be primary to our Selves and each other in some way. The ways in which these primary aspects are increased and intensified enhance the originality of female friendship (37).

Only a free woman can obtain the benefits of positive female bonding which is not interfered with by male forces. A woman who is entangled and engaged in an imbalanced heterosexual or heterosocial relationship cannot retain female homosociality freely. Women should be at liberty to forge female-female connections and this freedom is not something to be granted, it should be claimed. As Raymond discusses further, ‘the most blatant obstacle to female friendship is the prevailing patriarchal adage that women are women’s worst enemies’ (151). As she lists the barriers to the formation of female bonds, Raymond finds male interference to be the greatest impediment. Looking at the novels of Toni Morrison, we will find a sustained, rich exploration and adaptation of these ideas. Morrison usually portrays oppressive male forces as the main hindrance to the making and valuing of female friendship. In *Sula* for example, Nel’s marriage to Jude plays the role of an interruption to Sula and Nel’s generative female homosociality.

### **Women’s Bonds in Literary Representations**

In terms of literary history and representation of women, female friendship is featured in most Victorian novels, but this kind of relationship was usually marginalized. While the

heterosexual relationship was at the centre of attention and the plot, female homosociality came second. Margaret Atwood, in a 1986 article, observes:

Adult women, so the novel in general had it, should concentrate their attentions on men, not only because that was where love and money were to be found, but because women were either minor players, broken reeds or snakes. The gap between life as it was lived by women, and life as portrayed in novels by both women and men, is of interest.

Possibly Victorian novelists wrote so little about women's friendships because the perceived subject matter of the novel as a form - from *Moll Flanders* to *Madame Bovary* - was relentlessly heterosexual, though male-male friendships were frequently depicted. Perhaps it was female-audience demand: women's friendships were real life, romance was escape. Or perhaps it was connected to the fact that the publishing establishment was overwhelmingly male.<sup>11</sup>

Considering the reasons behind the marginalization of female friendship in the literature of the Victorian era, Atwood tries to clarify the causes of this pattern. Not only were the majority of the publishers and the writers of that era men, but the depiction of female friendship was viewed as of secondary importance, as supplementary not core. However, when it comes to female writers such as the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen, there are abundant examples of female relationships in their works. Female friendship existed as a social reality but only a minority of writers, mostly female, portrayed these connections as primary in their works.

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'That Certain Thing Called the Girlfriend', *New York Times*, 11 May 1986, p. 39.



Katherine B. Payant comments on the endurance of such a pattern into the modern era:

This tradition of ignoring relationships between women persisted into twentieth-century literature. When shown, female friendships were portrayed as catty rivalries. The popular culture reinforced these attitudes, telling women that their friendships with women were not to be taken seriously. Any girlfriend would understand if her chum broke a date with her to be with a man.<sup>12</sup>

As Payant observes, the pattern and problem still existed in the twentieth century, when Morrison wrote most of her novels. Yet the depiction of central female bonding, and the exploration of obstacles which prevent such a relation, are recurrent in her fictions. Payant later summarizes a positive development in female relations as portrayed in literature between the 1970s and 1980s. She comments

As the 1970s progressed, and even more in the 1980s, feminist thinkers stressed the importance of women forming bonds with each other and recognizing the strong female bonds in their lives. This idea of cherishing female friendships relates to the more abstract idea of “sisterhood,” the solidarity among women based on shared experience and essential to progress in changing women’s status (78).

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<sup>12</sup> Katherine B. Payant, *Becoming and Bonding: Contemporary Feminism and Popular Fiction by American Women Writers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 78.

In *Becoming and Bonding* Payant also observes the political situation of the 1980s, which directly impacted on feminism and the women's rights movement. In the U.S. President Reagan's policies made the movement more conservative and slowed the progress of radical change:

The 1980s, especially the first half of the decade, were a hard time for feminists. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked the beginning of the new political conservatism that would slow the progress of movements for social change such as minority rights and the Women's Movement. This new conservatism was already on the way in the 1970s with the rise of an antifeminist backlash in groups like the Moral Majority. Composed of evangelical Christians and other conservatives, the Moral Majority proclaimed traditional family values, declaring that feminism meant the doom of the American family (53).

This backdrop influenced the value placed on homosocial bonds. Despite these retarding factors, feminism still survived in that span of time and further important questions subsequently came to the fore:

Feminism did not die in the 1980s, despite gloomy or ecstatic predictions of its demise; rather, it continued to evolve [...] The idea of "sisterhood," early recognized as a concept necessary for the political unity of women, suggested many questions for feminist thinkers to explore. Were there special, positive experiences in "growing up female," and living as a woman in contemporary

society, and if so, what were they? Is motherhood, seen as a hindrance to personal growth by many feminists in the 1970s, actually an asset to woman's development of full humanity? What is the importance of women to each other as mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends? How do women help and sometimes hinder each other as they attempt to realize themselves? All of these topics received extensive treatment in feminist theoretical writing (54).

The questions explored by 1970s feminist critics later played an important role in the development of feminist ideas such as affirming womanhood, motherhood, and female bonding. Black women's self-actualization and self-discovery also can be regarded as outcomes of pondering upon these questions beyond the Second Wave. Morrison herself contributes her share in addressing these questions by probing the processes of development undergone by characters like Violet, Nel, Sula, Heed and Christine. She reflects and feeds into the change of attitude among feminist thinkers by posing gender questions and examining possible solutions through her writing.

As we have seen in hooks and Walker, the topic of female bonding has been explored by black female writers as well as white. According to Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are two prominent examples of writers who feature female bonds strongly in their works. She comments on Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Sula* by Morrison where the yearning for female friendship is more salient than the heterosexual desire:

In both these novels, one of each pair of women is more conventional, the other more exotic, flamboyant and rebellious. In each case they share a man: Shug is Celie's husband's mistress, Sula seduces Nel's husband on a whim. But in both there is a sense that the friendship creates a synthesis, a completion, which is larger than each woman separately. "Never was no difference between you," Sula's grandmother says to Nel. "Just alike." These are not icing-sugar friendships, all sweetness and teacups. They are complex and important, and they include pain, anger, feelings of betrayal, jealousy and hatred, as well as love (39).

Atwood clearly indicates that in both novels it is female friendship that is highlighted and achieved as the final goal. As she comments, the connection is completing for both pairs and is stronger than the personality of each of them alone. The relationship depicted by Morrison is not simply a casual friendship, but a complicated relationship which invites multi-faceted reactions from the reader. The complex nature of these bonds portrays the importance and value of female homosociality.

Atwood also speculates on some reasons why black writers were among the forerunners in featuring and celebrating female homosociality within their novels:

Sociologists might have something to say about why black women writers were among the first on this turf: they might cite the prevalence of households headed by women, the necessity of female support systems. Perhaps black women writers were less likely to accept the premises of the traditional novel, because they were more interested in expressing truths about the life they saw around them, truths not available to them in white fiction (39).

As she lists the possible motives of black female writers for depicting female homosociality in their works more often and fully than their white counterparts, she points out the historical background of gender and economic differences in black communities and the greater proportion of women heading and supporting their families as reasons for this phenomenon. Female led families, which are depicted in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, for example, are reflective of black realities for many in that period of time.

### **Toni Morrison Criticism**

Much criticism on Morrison has been alert to gender issues and has looked at female bonds, although often in a selective fashion. I decided on the topic of female homosociality for my study because of its prevalence and centrality in the novels, and because of my interest in the representation of the possibilities and limitations of this social relation. Scholarship has tended to focus on mother-daughter connections in a few better-known novels or female friendship in just a couple; exploration of multiple forms of homosociality in a range of novels that includes the most recent fiction seemed to present a gap yet to be filled. In the following section I will introduce selected key critics who have done invaluable work in drawing attention to women's relations in the novels of Toni Morrison.

Beginning with the poet, novelist and critic, Alice Walker, I would like to foreground her illuminating view point on Toni Morrison's works as a black writer in her 1976 article 'Saving the Life That Is Your Own':

When Toni Morrison said she writes the kind of books she wants to read, she was acknowledging the fact that in a society in which ‘accepted literature’ is so often sexist and racist and otherwise irrelevant or offensive to so many lives, she must do the work of two. She must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.<sup>13</sup>

Alice Walker recognises Toni Morrison as a writer who introduces the neglected lives of black people into the current body of literature in which there was a gap to be filled. As she says, Morrison is among those who start the journey toward more diverse images and experiences in stories and poems at a time when the realm of dominant literature was filled with white characters with whom black people had difficulty identifying. Morrison specifically brings to the light the lives of black women who have struggled a lot but had been noticed the least. She portrays a spectrum of different female characters living in various contexts and she highlights their connections, which most of the time empower or educate them and enable them to stand the harsh situations imposed upon them by both sexism and racism.

Stephanie Demetrakopoulos offers a feminist, developmental and mythological reading of *Sula*, asserting that:

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<sup>13</sup> Alice Walker, ‘Saving the Life That Is Your Own’, in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 8.

The internal union of parts of the feminine (rather than the feminine with the masculine) seems to be what Morrison insists on for the last stage of woman's personality development. Nel considers the men she knew after Jude left: "But now she was fifty-five and hard put to remember what all that had been about." Re-membering her feminine soul, Nel's last stages of individuation begin as an epiphany of Sula. This epiphany of Sula is the trigger, catalyst, and foundation for Nel's last stages of feminine individuation and self-knowledge. And Eva is the mother body out of which this truth and the enlightened Nel issue. As Sula turned to Nel during death, so Nel merges with Sula as she looks to her own final stage of life.<sup>14</sup>

Examining the different stages that a woman's identity undergoes in order to develop, Demetrakopoulos argues that female bonding contributes much to the final outcome of female individuation. She suggests that in this novel, Sula and Eva both help Nel to achieve the identity she always yearned to have, not through a heterosexual relationship but with the help of homosocial bonding. Demetrakopoulos's approach prompts questions about similar processes in the rest of Morrison's fiction.

Rebecca Ferguson in her illuminating book *Rewriting Black Identities: Transition and Exchange in the Novels of Toni Morrison* examines a complex idea of black identity in Morrison's works published before 2005. Considering the specific time and location of each novel, Ferguson follows the ups and downs in characters' lives and their journeys to self-actualization. She proposes that, as reflected by African American literature, including

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<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, 'Sula and the Primacy of Woman-to-Woman Bonds', in *Toni Morrison's Sula*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), pp. 77-92, p. 90.

Morrison's, "Identity" is [...] an important yet particularly elusive term in the context of black American culture, with its multiple dislocations and its long history of destabilising social and psychological experience'.<sup>15</sup> Ferguson's focus and historical approach shed particular light on feminist concerns and female bonding through the exploration of how setting and context can affect connections between women and consequently their processes of self-realization. For example, she offers an examination of friendships between Nel and Sula and Pecola and Claudia, suggesting these result in a regaining of identity.

Connie R. Schomburg in her article, 'To Survive the Whole, To Save the Self', examines the depiction of sisterhood in Morrison's works and concludes that

[T]hrough a close examination of [biological and non- biological] sibling relationships in Morrison's first five novels, one comes to understand that strong sibling relationships among black girls are not only empowering, but a prerequisite for acceptance into the sisterhood of black women.<sup>16</sup>

Schomburg traces the development of sisterhood in Morrison's fiction. Following the stories of female characters from childhood to womanhood, she draws the conclusion that those characters who establish successful female bonds with their siblings can enter the world of adult sisterhood which consequently empowers them. Schomburg also interestingly

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<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Hope Ferguson, *Rewriting Black Identities: Transition and Exchange in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Connie R. Schomburg, 'To Survive the Whole, To Save the Self: The Role of Sisterhood in the Novels of Toni Morrison', in *The Significance of Sibling Relationships in Literature*, ed. and intro. Joanna Stephens Mink and Janet Doubler Ward (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1992), pp. 149-57, p. 149.



emphasizes the role of non-biological siblings, that is the formation of female friendship between girls, and the impact this has on flourishing in adult life. Some of my concerns are similar but I will offer a broader study of female connections and how these inform the ability to shape a secure place in society.

Elizabeth Abel traces female bonding in a selection of works by different women writers and focuses especially on the mother-daughter relationship. Applying Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic approach to *Sula*,<sup>17</sup> Abel writes about the friendship between Nel and Sula:

Morrison carefully prepares the ground for this friendship, especially through her treatment of Nel's separation from her mother Helen, an essential step in Nel's orientation toward a peer relationship [...] this is an archetypal daughter's dilemma: to achieve independence from one's mother, frequently by devaluing her, without thereby devaluing one's feminine identity.<sup>18</sup>

In this argument, Nel and Sula both seek a secure shelter outside of their primary bonding with their mothers, perhaps since both mothers fit in two extreme categories defined by Chodorow.<sup>19</sup> Nel's mother keeps a vigilant, controlling eye on Nel while, on the other hand, Sula's mother neglects her when she needs her affirmation and affection. These factors

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Abel draws heavily on Nancy Chodorow's influential book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Abel, '(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women', *Signs*, 6/3 (1981), pp.413-43, p. 427.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 18.

foreground the developing friendship between Nel and Sula in which they find security and the chance to forge their own identity as young women. I will offer a parallel but more broadly informed reading of female connections in seven of Toni Morrison's works and will show how these connections can both help and limit the female characters in achieving self actualization and identity beyond patriarchy.

In a contrasting point of view to Abel, Andrea O'Reilly in her illuminating book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, argues that:

The frequency of maternal deaths in Morrison [...] functions as a metaphor to symbolize the prevalence of motherline disconnections and disruptions and their damaging consequences, particularly for women. At the level of the individual character, being motherless—whether by death of, or separation from the mother—means that the daughter is far more vulnerable to the hurts of a racist and sexist culture, because she has not received the cultural bearings that would give her a strong and proud selfhood.<sup>20</sup>

O'Reilly correctly explores the damage done to daughters when they are separated from their mothers - either by an external force or by their own choice - but she does not stretch her argument further. In this thesis, I will look at how Morrison introduces other female bonding as an alternative to the loss of blood mother-daughter relationships. As I will discuss later, in most of her novels, Morrison offers a female companion for the daughter who loses the

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<sup>20</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 78.

connection with her mother in order to ease the pain and empower her in identifying the true value of her woman-hood.

### **Mother-Daughter Relations: The Primary Bond in a Girl's Life**

The mother-daughter relationship is the first female bond that a baby girl develops and motherly affections reinforce the internalizing of the significance of homosocial relationships in a young girl's mind. Growing up in a matriarchal or matrifocal household emphasizes the importance of female bonding. According to Batte J. Dickerson

Female-headed families are often portrayed as matriarchies when they might actually be matrifocal. Matriarchy refers to mother/woman dominance over males, whereas matrifocality refers to mother/woman centeredness. In a matriarchal family system, the mother/woman is the dominant member holding the unit together, even if the father/man is present. In contrast, dominance is not a precondition for a matrifocal family system. Rather, it is a unit held together by the extended line of female kin: mother, daughter, and their children pooling resources and often sharing a household.<sup>21</sup>

Matriarchy, which sometimes bears the connotation of negative female dominance, might lead to negative female homosociality where one female rules the others. Matrifocality, in

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<sup>21</sup> Batte J. Dickerson, *African American Single Mothers* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), p. xv.

which there is no hierarchy, perhaps can lead to positive female homosociality and bonding. In Toni Morrison's novels the households are mainly matrifocal when a male force is not present: sometimes the male is dead or irresponsible and departed. The role of grandmothers is crucial as well since matrifocal families are often managed by them. Dickerson continues, 'In America it is traditionally assumed that grandmothers are the source of material and spiritual strength' (146). She also adds 'Between 1969 and 1985 there was a dramatic increase in the number of families headed by single African American females' (147). This might be one of the reasons why many of Morrison's households are managed by women. Morrison herself wrote most of her early books in the above mentioned time span. Eva in *Sula* and Pilate in *Song of Solomon* are examples of grandmothers supporting the other females of the household.

Referring back to Payant's *Becoming and Bonding*, the depiction of motherhood in the literature of the 1970s can be outlined thus:

As we have seen, early feminist thinking, though it grudgingly acknowledged the pleasures of motherhood, tended to portray it as an institution from which women needed to be liberated. Theorists also suggested that a mother could be a negative force in a daughter's life by inculcating patriarchal values in her and limiting her sense of her own possibilities. In keeping with these theories, most of the novels of the 1970s gave little attention to the relationships of mothers and daughters or made the protagonist's mother one of her problems. These mothers, traditional women of the 1940s and 1950s, are poor role models in the eyes of their daughters (55).

As mentioned above, motherhood as an institution was regarded by some feminists as a limitation to women's growth; since mothers have been viewed as at times the mouthpiece of patriarchy, the mother-daughter relationship was regarded as potentially destructive in that era. In *Sula*, for example, Eva is sometimes a negative matriarchal force in Sula's life, and in *Paradise* as well Patricia is depicted by Morrison as unable to stop herself from hurting her daughter Billie Delia. However, at the end of this decade and in the early 1980s Payant observes

By the late 1970s we begin to see a different view of motherhood and mother/daughter relationships emerging in feminist nonfiction and in the literature as well. Opposite the view of the "monster mother" is the view of the mother as muse, as a source of encouragement and inspiration (57).

It seems that in the representation and thinking of this time, the destructive relationship shifts into an instructive bonding and mothers become a source of inspiration and creativity, as one can trace in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*:

Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories--like her life--must be recorded. It is

probably for this reason that so much of what I have written is about characters whose counterparts in real life are so much older than I am (240).

Walker is a good example of a writer in that era who regards her mother as a muse who inspired her by telling stories, and her essay collection is about reclaiming this kind of heritage for women. Here the mother-daughter bond is primary.

bell hooks, while examining different types of female love in *Communion*, considers the mother-daughter relationship as well. She condemns patriarchy as an agency which normalizes hostility and competition between mothers and daughters (123). She regrets that many successful women fail in establishing a fruitful relationship with their daughters since:

Competition between successful women and their daughters is often rooted in the adult woman's fear of aging in a patriarchal culture. No matter how talented and powerful a woman is, the rules of sexism continue to render her valueless as she ages. Hence, a gifted, successful, attractive, woman may feel threatened by the reality that sexism ensures that her daughter, who may be less gifted and not at all successful or attractive, will still "win" by being more valued by virtue of youth (124).

The mother-daughter relationship becomes more complicated in a patriarchal, heterosexual context. As hooks writes, the sexual economy forced upon women in a supremacist society turns a caring mother-daughter relationship into a hostile competition. One such example

depicted by Morrison is the relationship between Pallas and her artist mother in *Paradise*, who out of jealousy steals her daughter's lover to prove that she is still attractive according to patriarchal norms. As hooks asserts, it is tragic that 'women find it easier to rage against one another. Anger directed at males feels more threatening, their power to retaliate more dangerous' (126). She helpfully charts the consequences of female hostility, specifically conflict between mothers and daughters.

On the other hand, Paula J. Caplan argues for the dual nature of the mother-daughter relationship. This connection, shaped by the dominant ideology, can be based on love or hate. She observes

The dramatically polarized mother-images of Angel and Witch [...] fuel daughters' ambivalence about their mothers. The Perfect Mother myths are a source of pressure not just to love but to adore our mothers. The Bad Mother myths transform our irritation and disappointment with our mother into fury and a sense of betrayal. Because the one feeling our culture prohibits women from expressing openly is anger, both mother and daughter suppress negative feelings, creating a pressure-cooker atmosphere and, ultimately, explosions of rage.<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of external forces such as overt patriarchy, Caplan examines the internalized factors which may make such relationships ambivalent. The good and evil mother myth influences both sides' ideas about each other. For instance, in *Paradise*, the strict mother

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<sup>22</sup> Paula J. Caplan, *The New Don't Blame the Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 21.

Patricia forces her daughter to run away through her controlling behaviour. Throwing an iron at her daughter, resulting in injuries to Billie Delia's face, transforms Patricia into an 'evil' mother which, creates disappointment and anger in her daughter. Although Patricia herself is a victim of the patriarchal, colourist society in which she tries to survive, she sacrifices the mother-daughter relationship for the sake of society's norms.

Patricia Hill Collins compares the structures of white and black families and the division of roles in them: 'The archetypal white middle-class nuclear family divides family life into two oppositional spheres - the "male" sphere of economic providing and the "female" sphere of affective nurturing, mainly mothering', while in black families, which may not be defined by these spheres in the same way, 'ensuring the survival of children [is] a fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women's motherhood'.<sup>23</sup> As she comments, one difference is between the male-headed families in white society and more female-headed families in black communities. While in a typical white middle-class family the modes of nurturing the children carry the stamp of economic privilege, often in black families it is the question of survival which matters. While historically in many black families the mother has to work, it is more common that in white families mothers had and have time and space to nurture their children in a different model of domesticity.

As Patricia Hill Collins further points out:

Black women's shift from Southern agriculture to domestic work in Southern and Northern towns and cities represented a change in the type of work done, but not in the meaning of work to women and their families. Whether they wanted or not, the

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, 'Black Women and Motherhood', in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 117- 135, p. 120.



majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female “occupation” (121).

In a racially unequal economic system, black women should work to support the survival of the whole community and particularly the children. Indirectly such women sacrifice their self-determination for the sake of their children but, at the same time, they might fail to establish an intimate, affectionate mother-child relationship since they cannot afford it. This background can account for Eva’s practical family relations in the early to mid twentieth-century setting of *Sula*.

Andrea O’Reilly, in her important book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, explores the nature of black motherhood and relates it to the issue of empowerment:

Building upon black women’s experiences of and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practised and prescribed in the dominant culture. Morrison defines and positions maternal identity as a site of power for black women. From this position of power black mothers engage in a maternal practice that has as its explicit goal, the empowerment of children (1).

According to O’Reilly, what Morrison depicts in her novels, based on the realities of women in black families, is very different from the realities for mothers in most white families. From this perspective, while in white families women may be subordinate and dependent, black women more often have to be independent and supportive. The power women practice in black families paves the way to the empowerment of their children. O’Reilly believes that

what Morrison depicts in her novels as black motherhood defies the stereotypical imagery of ‘mammy figures’ and enables women to articulate their power (3). She also writes:

However, in Morrison’s fiction [...], black mothers, despite the power of their maternal standpoint, must mother their children in a world hostile to them and often must battle to provide the preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing necessary for the empowerment of their children. Morrison’s fiction affirms and confirms the importance of motherwork by detailing the personal and cultural suffering that occurs when it is absent. Likewise, Morrison’s fiction bespeaks the despair and rage of mothers who, in the face of racism and poverty, are not able to fulfil these essential tasks of motherwork (118).

I will discuss later that how ‘the despair and rage of mothers’, caused by an oppressive context, can hinder the mother- daughter relationships from meeting the standards of an ideal image. Although the ideas of O’Reilly on female empowerment can give insight into female characters and mothers in Morrison’s works, they are less helpful for interpretation of the children and daughters who are often shown to suffer from a lack or distortion of maternal nurturing in their lives.

Taking a critical and an affirmative view, Hill Collins writes

Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical. An ongoing tension exists between efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit systems of race, gender, and class oppression and efforts by African-American

women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood. The controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother and the practices they justify are designed to oppress. In contrast, motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment.<sup>24</sup>

As Collins argues, on one hand within slavery women were regarded as breeding animals to increase the number of slaves – and consequently the property of the master – and on the other hand they struggled to define their own value and power through the experience of motherhood. According to Collins, the ‘controlling images’ forced upon black women are means to oppress them more. The image of the mammy, for instance, belongs to the negative stereotypes created and perpetuated by dominant racist and sexist society. In Collins’ words: ‘Mammy is the ideal black mother for she recognizes her place. She is paid next to nothing and yet cheerfully accepts her inferior status’ (44). One of the formative situations behind the separate black feminist movement was the ongoing exploitation of black women as nurses or mummies in white women’s houses.

Morrison represents matrifocal, sometimes matriarchal, households in which a mighty female figure, usually a grandmother, is the financial supporter of the whole family in a positive way. In Collins’ view, motherhood can be an opportunity for black mothers to make their existence felt; they can enjoy this chance to define their being and reinforce self-respect. According to Collins, African American mothers also have another important role:

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<sup>24</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 176.

African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection, either by trying to shield their daughters as long as possible from the penalties attached to their race, class, and gender status or by teaching them skills of independence and self-reliance so that they will be able to protect themselves (126).

By practising so, African American mothers not only try to protect their daughters and teach them how to define their own existence, but they also raise another generation of black mothers who will play the same role for their daughters. The role of protector is emphasised here since a black female is more vulnerable in a racist and patriarchal society. An extreme case exemplifying this is Sethe who sacrifices her daughter in order to protect her against slavery's damage.

In a section of her collection of historical documentation, Gerda Lerner points out the situation of black women during the era of slavery:

Under slavery, black women were savagely exploited as unpaid workers, as were black men; black women bred children to the master's profit and were sexually available to any white man who had cared to use them. Mullatoes or especially beautiful black girls were sold at fancy prices as concubines.<sup>25</sup>

Black women suffered from being considered as a means to reproduce property and as objects for sexual use and pleasure. This led to fears about being labelled as immoral or as a prostitute among black women, who continued to be vulnerable to white men after slavery ended. This

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<sup>25</sup> *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 45.

fear was often passed on from one generation to another generation. As we will see in *Sula*, Nel's mother tries to bring up her daughter in a strict way to protect her from such labelling. A similar situation can be traced in *Jazz* and *A Mercy*, where Alice's parents force restrictive rules upon her because of their anxieties and Floren's mother pleads for Jacob to take her away from the rising threat of sexual exploitation. Lerner also discusses the myth of the 'bad' black woman (163) which continued to operate after slavery came to an end and was often the excuse for white men to exploit black women sexually. Lerner draws a graphic picture of the consequences: such myths of availability and disrepute weakened the black family, robbed the black male of his (patriarchal) role as supporter and protector of his wife and children, potentially poisoned motherhood and created mixed race children, unsure of their origins (46). The destructive impact of slavery and its legacies on mother-daughter relationships can be traced in most of Toni Morrison's works, something which I will explore in detail later, specifically in *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*. Characters like Eva, Sethe and Florens's mother exemplify such suffering and attempts at protection.

Caroline Rody in her book *The Daughter's Return* comments on the recurrent theme of mother-daughter relationships in African American women's literature.<sup>26</sup> She further explores this specific relationship in some outstanding black writers and writes:

Interest in the relations of black mothers and daughters has grown to the point of becoming the focus of novels like Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Terry Macmillan's *Mama* (1987), Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Charlotte Watson Sherman's *One Dark Body* (1993), and a key subplot in dozens of others; the 1991 publication of the

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<sup>26</sup> Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 42.

anthology *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters* underscores the trend. In this regard, African-American women's texts share with texts by American women writers of many backgrounds the late 1970s to 1990s-era shift from struggle with mothers toward affirmation of mother daughter relationship [...] yet even in this context, the matrifocality of recent black women's fiction seems exceptional (50).

This highlights how African American writers, like other American novelists during the 1970s-1990s period, have moved from disregarding mother-daughter relations to praising such bonds. I outlined earlier the shift from portraying mothers as hindrances to their daughters' growth to picturing them as the source of inspiration in African American writing in this era. Caroline Rody sums up:

It is notable, then, that the course of the renaissance has transformed the fictional black mother from the antagonist of the early battles for individuation to a figure who is at once more complex and also more mythified — even celebrated — in 1980s matrifocal romances, such as *Beloved*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). [...] Though a competition of discourses about the black mother continues — clichés alternately waning and reviving, new images appearing to refute them — the overall trend in black women's fiction has been a rise of powerful maternal figures whose strength and whose faults alike are associated with a reclaimed, honored history (48).

All in all, by examining the change of attitude among writers toward portraying mothers, Rody offers a helpful study on African American literature and representations of mother-daughter relations. While she makes a case for Morrison's daughters as distinctive, my thesis seeks to position the author's interest in female familial bonds within the wider range of women's bonds with which her fiction engages.

As Rody comments, Morrison depicts the strengths and faults of black females who try to support their families on their own. None of Morrison's characters offer a perfect image of a devoted mother and, as we will see, this is congruent with her portrayals of both positive and negative homosociality. Shaped by particular historical backgrounds and pressures, her mothers are supportive but can also dominate or deprioritise affection. Brian Ward examines the wider phenomenon of assuming black families to be matriarchal:

Black matriarchy was traced to slavery, when the black man was rendered unable to fulfill his "natural" patriarchal function as breadwinner and protector. As the black male was forced to submit to humiliating physical abuse at the hands of a master or overseer, and compelled to watch impotently as his wife and children were similarly brutalized, so his authority, respect and power within his own family were fatally undermined. This emasculation produced a matriarchal society, with the black woman emerging as titular or functional head of the household. This pattern was sustained after emancipation as black women found relatively abundant, if still tightly circumscribed, opportunities in the job market, while black

males struggled in vain for the economic opportunities and social status which might restore their patriarchal authority and self-respect.<sup>27</sup>

Ward argues that it is the dominant society that both shapes patriarchal expectations of masculinity and, in a racist framework, deprives black men of a patriarchal role in their families. He describes the impact of slavery which marginalized black men and instituted black matrifocal households. Even after emancipation black women enjoyed a better chance of finding jobs as servants or laborers, thus female-headed families survived. This reading emphasizes gender construction as intertwined with the history of racial hierarchy in America.

Ward continues:

Black macho and black matriarchy were essentially elaborate myths: cultural constructions which served to explain black disadvantage and compensate for the awful sense of powerlessness which afflicted black males. They symbolically displaced black male frustration at the whole matrix of racial discrimination, social marginality and economic distress into the world of sexual politics where victories of a sort could be won, “heroic” deeds performed, and “evil” destroyed (151).

Ward explains how the impotence of black men in a discriminating society is due to the oppression imposed by racism and wider models of patriarchy. He regards patriarchy as a norm which black men were unable to fulfill due to the hierarchies left by slavery. In

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<sup>27</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 73.



particular he unpacks the myths of black macho and black matriarchy arising from such structures. American society has marginalized black men, giving the appearance of empowering black females.

As outlined above, motherhood has been a significant, complex topic for black feminists and Morrison critics have explored female-led households and the mother-daughter bond in a variety of ways. In almost all of her novels, Morrison portrays different types of mother-daughter relationships and at the same time she examines where they fail and the underlying causes of this fracture in black families. This thesis will address how Morrison engages with mother figures and their relationships to their daughters in a wide range of novels, including how she suggests female homosociality or 'other mothering' as a substitute for a non-sustaining mother-daughter connection. Indeed, mothering needs to be situated alongside the other forms of female homosociality dwelt on in her narratives.

### **Black Feminism and Lesbianism**

Morrison has never overtly invoked lesbianism in her work but critics such as Barbara Smith have sometimes considered Morrison's portrayal of female homosociality as queer, therefore in this section the relationship between lesbianism and female homosociality is briefly explored. Lesbianism can be considered as a form of female homosociality which includes female homosexuality and same sex sexual desire as well. To be a lesbian is seen by some as dictated by nature and by others as chosen by free will, which means that some people understand themselves as homosexual by birth while some choose to develop same sex

relations. Feminists are sometimes regarded or labeled as lesbian as a pejorative term within mainstream and/or anti-feminist discourse. Janice G. Raymond in *A Passion for Friends* writes:

[M]any perceive any intense relationship between women as lesbian. The ultimate threat to men by any act of female intimacy is the threat of lesbianism. In fact many men perceive any act of female authority as lesbian [...] The woman who is strong enough to authorize herself is viewed not only as taking power from men but as taking women from men (15).

As Raymond suggests, any intimate bonding between women, physically or emotionally, has been received negatively by men who consider this bonding as a threat to themselves. Women gaining power through bonding with their own sex is a danger to patriarchs who regard themselves as the main support to and authority for women.

As Beverly Guy-Sheftall, a black female scholar, recounts:

I was also astute enough at the beginning to avoid the term “feminist” which is frequently perceived, unfortunately, to be a dirty word in the Black community, even among academics. Causes for hostility to feminism within communities of color, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, are complex. The most frequently stated reasons are that feminism is a white female issue, anti-male, associated

with lesbianism, and divisive because it detracts from the more urgent issue of racism.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from issues of racism, which dissuaded black women activists from calling themselves feminists, the danger of being called lesbian was another worrying fact which made them eschew feminist as an epithet. They preferred to be cautious in using the term rather than be labeled something they were not or that marginalized them further. Audre Lorde also discusses the same idea of lesbianism and negative perceptions in *Sisters Outsiders*:

Only to those Black men who are unclear about the pathways of their own definition can the self-actualization and self-protective bonding of Black women be seen as a threatening development. Today, the red herring of lesbian-baiting is being used in the Black community to obscure the true face of racism/sexism. Black women sharing close ties with each other, politically or emotionally, are not the enemies of Black men. Too frequently, however, some Black men attempt to rule by fear those Black women who are more ally than enemy. These tactics are expressed as threats of emotional rejection.<sup>29</sup>

Here it seems that Audre Lorde is echoing Raymond and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Any kind of bonding between women is considered as a threat to black men's manhood and authority if

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<sup>28</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 'A Black Feminist Perspective on Transforming the Academy', in *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, ed. Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 77-89, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Audre Lorde Compendium: Essays, Speeches, and Journals* (London: Pandora, 1996), p. 100.

the definition of masculinity is precarious and misguided. The self- definition of black women through an intense connection with their peers cannot be tolerated by men who in a supremacist society are supposed to be the only definers. Here as well Lorde points out that by labelling women as lesbians men try to downgrade any kind of female bonding which socially and politically empowers them. The label is a means to marginalise any feminist or homosocial position.

bell hooks in 'Homophobia in Black Communities' talks about the environment in which she was brought up and traces the homophobic behaviour of her community:

In the particular black community where I was raised there was a real double standard. Black male homosexuals were often known, were talked about, were seen positively, and played important roles in community life, whereas lesbians were talked about solely in negative terms, and the women identified as lesbians were usually married [...] In those days homophobia directed at lesbians was rooted in deep religious and moral belief that women defined their womanness through bearing children.<sup>30</sup>

hooks points out the particular discrimination in a black community where gay men were apparently accepted by the society whereas lesbians could not enjoy this kind of liberty. She mentions the religious root of this homophobia and sexism which defined womanhood through having children. Lesbianism was regarded as sinful since the unnatural pairing would

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<sup>30</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 121.

not let the women play their roles as mothers. This definition has wider implications for female identity.

hooks believes that lesbianism is a way of practising freedom for women:

The freedom young women have to choose female partners without shame has been given them by earlier struggles to end sexism and homophobia. Their decision to explore varied choices usually comes from their questioning of patriarchy and male domination and their desire to have different relationships from those that they have witnessed older generations having (121).

hooks advocates having a circle of loved ones rather than dedicating one's life only to loving one man. She regards such freedom of choice as an act of resistance against the domination in a male supremacist society. hooks considers lesbianism as a political position as well as a sexual orientation; she sees it as a way of questioning restrictive norms.

Toni Morrison presents intimate female relationships in her novels but she never overtly talks about female homosexuality, as Alice Walker, for instance, does in *The Color Purple*. Despite this, famously Barbara Smith offers a lesbian reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*:

In both works the relationships between girls and women are essential, yet at the same time physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women. Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters, I discovered in rereading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate

friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family.<sup>31</sup>

Smith has advanced a new approach to Toni Morrison's women-centred novels. However, if Morrison attacks heterosexual institutions it does not necessarily follow that she is investigating homosexual relationships. If she criticises male-female bonds and foregrounds ties between women it cannot be inferred that she puts forward lesbianism as a solution for the lack of emotion or equality in male-female relationships. Morrison herself in an interview shares her viewpoint:

It has been a discredited relationship. When I was writing *Sula*, I was under the impression that for a large part of the female population a woman friend was considered a secondary relationship. A man and a woman's relationship was primary. Women, your own friends, were always secondary relationships when the man was not there. Because of this, there's that whole cadre of women who don't like women and prefer men. We had to be taught to like one another [...] When much of the literature was like that—when you read about women together (not lesbians or those who have formed long relationships that are covertly lesbian, like in Virginia Woolf's work), it is an overtly male view of females together.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 168- 85, p. 175.

<sup>32</sup> Elissa Schapell, 'Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction', in *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 62-90, at p. 79.

Here Morrison echoes Raymond's notion of 'Prime Order'. As mentioned earlier, Raymond believes that female friendship is primary and male-female relationships can be considered secondary to this connection. While criticizing literary traditions in which there are ample male points of view of female friendship, Morrison invites women to regard their female bonding as primary in their lives. In *Love* Morrison depicts women's rivalry yet at the end unveils the true value of female friendship. In none of her novels does Morrison overtly focus on female homosexuality, although there is some implicit suggestion of same sex physical intimacy among the Convent women in *Paradise*. She may consider close, affectionate female friendship as a counterbalance to the dysfunctional male-female relationship but unlike several of her contemporaries she never explicitly focuses on female homosexuality, rather investing weight and complexity in multiple forms of female homosociality. Thus in this thesis I will not consider homosexuality as a significant feature of Morrison's works. I will focus instead on the non-sexual homosocial connections among women which I argue are more prominent and more central to the politics of her fiction.

Most of the critical frameworks and critics looked at above feature again in the chapters that follow. As indicated already, in trying to shape its own approach, this thesis will examine the double-sided and complex nature of female homosociality in seven of Morrison's works, including her recent novels. It will attempt to draw a careful map of the development of female characters and their formative relationships as found to be recurrent and evolving throughout Morrison's fiction. Tracing multiple manifestations of homosociality, their social contexts and consequences, my comparative readings hope to uncover feminist interconnections within, and bring new insight to our sense of, Morrison's body of work.

## Chapter One

### Friendship and Age: Homosociality in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Jazz*

#### Introduction

In an interview discussion on sisterhood with Sandi Russell, Morrison observes 'Black women had to be real and genuine to each other, there was no one else.'<sup>33</sup> As outlined in my main introduction, Morrison shows interest in female bonding in most of her works. She explores an expansive and loose definition of the term, in order to stimulate the reader to enquire into the meaning of female homosociality as a potential source of power for women. Looking at the relationships between women, both negative and positive, will help to highlight a major preoccupation of the author and reveal the embeddedness of these relationships in wider social patterns and in the politics of being both female and black in America.

In the two novels under consideration in this chapter, *Sula* (1973) and *Jazz* (1992), Morrison depicts two pairs of girls in their youth whose bonding is interrupted by a male force. Sula and Nel enjoy a close friendship until Nel marries; Dorcas and Felice are also good friends until Joe enters and their world changes. In both novels one of the girls dies, Sula in her thirties and Dorcas when she is still a teenager. Looking at the novels together, one might even suggest the relationship between Sula and Nel, which was terminated by Sula's death, is resurrected in the connection between Alice and Violet, two older female

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<sup>33</sup> Sandi Russell, "It's OK to say OK", in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. N. Y. McKay (Boston, Mass.: Hall, 1988), pp. 43-47, p. 45.



figures in *Jazz*. I will examine this unexpected friendship as a bond between middle-aged women who both help each other to survive personal crisis and alienating pasts. It is also worth noting that in both novels we have the recurring image of a female-ruled household in which the trinity of grandmother – daughter – granddaughter is manifested.

In this chapter, I will examine the different forms of female homosociality featured by Morrison in these two novels, one written early in her career and the other later, after her reputation as a writer had been cemented. Although these works are set in different periods of time and the stories follow quite different patterns, the issue of female bonding is evoked similarly in both in many ways. The action of *Sula* occurs between 1919 and 1965, with a gap of ten years between the two main parts, something which formally reinforces the separation of Sula and Nel's childhood from their adulthood. In *Jazz*, the narrative present is in the 1920s but the writer also explores the memories and background of some characters, thus ranging back to earlier times in the South. The difference between the two narrative schemes that Morrison employs in the two novels is significant. She chooses a longer time period in *Sula*, and indicates this by using dates as chapter headings, while examining the bonding between Sula and Nel in both their childhood and adulthood, whereas in *Jazz*, since she is exploring the friendship between two already middle-aged women whose lives are set, she focuses on a shorter narrative present of about one year. I will start my analysis with *Sula*, which was published before *Jazz*, finding that the depiction of female homosociality is more explicitly central in this work.

In *Sula*, to which I will turn now, Morrison primarily deals with the friendship between two girls who take different paths into their adulthood. The reader, like Nel, does not come to know the full significance of female friendship until the very end of the novel, when

Nel eventually recalls Sula and, facing the loss, cries ““girl, girl, girlgirlgirl””.<sup>34</sup> In the following analysis, the significance of female bonding, as well as its function and outcomes, will be discussed. The novel is replete with relationships among women. Sometimes the relationship works and helps characters to develop, and sometimes it is full of hostility and enmity. My investigation will encompass both aspects of female bonding, also tracing concerns with age in relation to friendship.

### **The Female Bonding and Friendship between Sula and Nel as Young Girls**

*Sula* is the story of friendship between two girls whose relationship affects the development of their characters all through the novel. When this novel was published in 1973, it drew the attention of many critics since it was the first novel with both a black female protagonist and the main theme of female friendship. Critics raised different questions around the novel’s actual protagonist – whether it is Sula or Nel or even both? – and the nature of their relationship. Some critics supported Barbara Smith’s reading of *Sula* as a lesbian novel and some refuted this notion, finding that Smith overstated her queer argument. My concern here is not with the female Bildungsroman, an avenue taken up by other studies; I would like to scrutinize the female bonding between these two central characters. The story is divided into two main parts: one encompasses these characters’ childhood until Nel’s marriage and Sula’s departure, and the other one deals with Sula’s return and the events that follow. In this section, I will focus on tracing the female friendship between Sula and Nel in the first part.

Many critics assert that while *The Bluest Eye* deals with a black girl’s childhood,

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<sup>34</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973) (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 174.

*Sula* deals with two black females' adulthood. This may be justified by the short chapters of Part One, which is about Nel and Sula's childhood, and the much more elaborated Part Two that mainly deals with Nel and Sula's adulthood. Notwithstanding the fact that there is more concise information about Nel and Sula's childhood, part one establishes important family contexts and includes some crucial incidents that affect their adulthood.

The narrator comments upon the girls' close friendship, observing 'they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's [...]. In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other' (*S*, p. 84). The two girls seem as one unit in their childhood. Completely free from social conventions which later changed their reactions, in their childhood they act as two halves of a whole. Further, the reader is told about the two girls' dreams and the ease and comfort that they felt when they first met. Commenting on their dreams, Karen F. Stein states that

Dreams play a significant role in the story. Dreams build the initial link between Sula and Nel, and foretell their different paths of self-expression. In her daydreams, Nel fantasizes "lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince" [...] like the passive fairy-tale heroine. When Nel later marries, her life becomes one of passive limitation and stagnation [...] Sula's fantasies, by contrast, are actively sensuous ones in which she gallops "through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses" [...]. Resisting human ties, she is the daring, sensuous, active woman, seeking to

experience life.<sup>35</sup>

Morrison begins to unravel the notion of female friendship and its significance in the girls' childhood dreams. Even when they dream about the future, there is always a ubiquitous other presence watching their dreams and sharing their joys. This presence is the female friend who shares such moments of delight all through their lives. As the narrative explains, 'They had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolor visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream' (*S*, p. 84). Right after telling about this constant presence in their dreams, Morrison writes of their familiarity in their relationship: 'So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends' (*S*, p. 52). They feel ease and reassurance because in their dreams they have been always yearning for a female comrade to combat the loneliness.

Sula and Nel are raised in two extremely different situations and by mothers with far different attitudes. Sula is raised in a household where there is no restriction on her behaviour, whereas Nel lives with her rigid mother who puts limitations on everything, even the girl's imagination. As I will explore later, this contrast forms a parallel to the upbringings of Alice and Violet in *Jazz*. While Alice Manfred was raised in a strict family, Violet had the liberty of finding her own way when she was a teenager. In both novels, family background seems to

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<sup>35</sup> Karen F. Stein, 'Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Black Woman's Epic', in *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula: Selected Essays and Criticisms of the Works by the Nobel Prize-Winning Author*, ed. Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (Troy, NY: Whitston, 2000), pp. 49-60, p. 52.

inform later bonding.

After Nel returns from her trip to the South for her great-grandmother's funeral, she commences a process of self-recognition and she excludes her mother from this process. She contemplates and tries to realize her being as an individual: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me'" (*S*, p. 28). On the other hand, Sula is attracted to Nel after eavesdropping on her own mother, who was telling her friends that she loves her daughter Sula but she does not like her. Both girls, as Morrison explains, 'had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, [so] they had set about creating something else to be' (*S*, p. 52). Their marginalization as black and female feeds into their mutual invention as young companions. Both suffering from apparently loveless mothers and dysfunctional connections in their homes, they fall for each other and find comfort in the presence of a female friend who can compensate for all the lack of affection and their peripheral position in society. They find that, in spite of all their differences, they have one goal in common: to be someone and to make their existence felt in a context that limits them. In this regard, Sula appears to be more successful.<sup>36</sup> She transgresses early twentieth-century social norms, asserts her own ideas, and tries to make herself, whereas Nel conforms to patriarchal conventions and eventually confronts the consequences.

Andrea O' Reilly believes:

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<sup>36</sup> In an interview, Morrison describes Sula as a masculine character since 'she is adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared, she really ain't scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything.' Robert Stepto, 'Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,' *The Massachusetts Review*, 18.3 (1977), 473-489, p. 487.

In patriarchal culture, daughters, as they grow into women, need mothers by their side to keep intact their original self. Sula enters patriarchy, inscribed in the text by the defiling things and grave, alone, without a mother at her side. Disconnected from the motherline and the values of the ancient properties it conveys, she rejects motherhood and embraces dominant standards of female success and well-being. In particular, she fashions a female selfhood modelled on the values of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency (61).

As I have mentioned before, O' Reilly helpfully explores the consequences of mother-daughter relationship loss, but she does not acknowledge that Morrison suggests the healing of this wound can be achieved through female friendship. Sula and Nel both separate their way from their mothers' but Sula seems to be more successful in her approach and offers a positive portrayal of focusing on making herself rather than on making others. In the later novel *Jazz*, there is an echo of Nel and Sula's struggles in the pairing of Felice and Dorcas. Felice was deprived of her parents, who had to work in another city, and Dorcas loses her mother to racial violence and is raised by her strict aunt, Alice. Felice and Dorcas, who both suffer from the lack of a proper mother-daughter relationship, also compensate for this lack through their friendship.

Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek also make an attempt to understand the influence of the friendship on the development of the characters and concerns in *Sula*. They propose that

[i]n their childhood friendship, Nel's and Sula's antithetical strengths and weaknesses assure them mutual dependency and thus equality of participation. Sula's preservation of herself allows Nel to limn boundaries between herself and her mother; in turn, Nel's attention to details of connection and her calm consistency allow Sula's rigid boundaries to become more fluid, as when they work together digging holes in the earth or when Sula empathically discovers "Shad" [...]. Their friendship empowers them until the end of their adolescence, when caretaking must be extended to the adult world of love and work.<sup>37</sup>

This argument reinforces mine; both girls seek a refuge in this friendship to run away from their limited homelife and the female bonding empowers them to achieve self-recognition. They complete each other in such a way that this compensation for the other one's flaws gives them power to make an attempt at making their existence felt.

In another influential reading of *Sula*, Barbara Smith writes that

[d]espite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters, I discovered in rereading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and

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<sup>37</sup> Missy Dehn Kubitschek and Diane Gillespie, 'Who cares? Women-Centred Psychology in *Sula*', in *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula: Selected Essays and Criticisms of the Works by the Nobel Prize-Winning Author*, ed. Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (Troy, NY: Whitston, 2000), pp. 19- 48, p. 41.

feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact on each other's lives.<sup>38</sup>

Smith proposes an alternative framework for understanding the positive valuation of female relations in the novel. The passion that she talks about might represent the existence of an unconscious lesbian desire. The critical treatment of heterosexual norms also leads to her deliberately provocative deployment of the term 'lesbian'. Other critics find this view unsupported and seek other terms for the approach to homosocial bonds in *Sula*. Toni Morrison herself is amongst those who refute Smith's reading. Bonnie Zimmerman tries to draw the attention of Smith to the romantic heterosexual relationships in the novel which cannot be ignored.<sup>39</sup> Susan Willis also takes issue with Smith for regarding Sula and Nel's friendship as sexual rapport alone, writing that

[a]lthough Smith's essay is aimed at unfolding the radical nature of Morrison's novel, I think she errs in couching her argument solely in terms of sexuality and in assimilating all of Sula's radical behaviour to an innate but thwarted lesbianism. Sula is an extremely political figure whose passionate articulation of contradiction casts a critical perspective upon all forms of domination.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 168- 85, p. 175.

<sup>39</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, 'What Has Never Been: an Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Routledge, 1991), Pp. 177-210, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Willis, 'Black Women Writers: Taking a Critical Perspective', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 211- 237, p. 232.



Here, Willis broadens the critical approach to the novel to encompass more plural political representations and disruptions. She considers *Sula* as a more multi-dimensional narrative, rather than one preoccupied with a lesbian plot or ‘queering’ perspective. The anarchy that the character of Sula seems to represent is regarded as more widely powerful in Willis’s reading. I will discuss the nature of the main female relationship further in the next section, which deals with Sula and Nel’s adulthood, and then will come to a tentative conclusion about this bonding.

The shared digging of holes in mud and the drowning of Chicken Little are such prominent episodes in Sula and Nel’s childhood that almost all critics have commented upon them. For instance, Helena Michie, referring to the two incidents, writes that

Nel and Sula copy each other in their sexual experimentation; each in turn takes the lead at introducing change. This part of the passage ends with a symbol of unity and sameness as the two holes collapse into one; [...] the killing of Chicken Little is an especially mysterious moment in a text filled with mysteries and secrets. It begins, however, to establish a difference between Sula as actor and Nel as watcher [...]. Up to this point it is Nel who has had the adventures, Nel who has left Medallion for the exoticism of New Orleans and maternal separation; in this scene Sula literally seems to leave Nel behind.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 165.

Again here, Michie tries to offer a reading of *Sula* in terms of sexuality and introduces the first incident to reinforce her idea. The act of the girls digging holes may symbolically represent sexual intercourse but many critics have failed to elaborate further upon forms of emotional and spiritual bonding, which are presented as more powerful than physical bonding. Even if we consider this act as a symbol of unity, it would seem more comprehensive to consider it as potentially a symbol of other kinds of bonding also. Michie also compares the girls' characters in terms of how far each will risk nonconformity and show intrepidity. She believes that up to the drowning episode Nel, who tries to obtain an individual identity after her eventful trip South, seems to be more assertive than Sula; but in Chicken Little's death Sula as an actor proves to be more powerful than Nel as a mere watcher. Later on Sula accentuates her independence and will by leaving the town and commencing her adventure in the wider world alone. Quite interestingly, in *Jazz*, although it is Dorcas who leaves Felice to explore heterosexual relationships, in the end the roles are reversed and Felice becomes a more mature character through her female bonding with Violet.

As I explored above, there is a critical dispute over the kind of acts and bonding that Nel and Sula engage in as girls. I would like to add that while sexual awakening may be indicated, other forms of bonding are more dominant than any physical union in the novel. It is a multifaceted unity and relation between women which potentially empowers those like Sula and Nel. Indeed, erotic awareness may be just a means to achieve wider emotional, communal, and spiritual female bonding.

In the words of Kathy J. Whitson:

Childhood friends, Nel and Sula take very different paths into womanhood. Raised to be “respectable,” Nel remains within the tightly knit black community, pursuing a traditional self-abnegating role as wife and mother; in contrast, the unconventional Sula becomes an outlaw and a pariah, leaving home to lead a life of independence and sexual freedom. The novel unsettles easy assumptions not only about female gender roles but also about the nature of good and evil.<sup>42</sup>

Though Nel and Sula find the differences in their characters appealing, eventually it seems they choose their individual path toward the future based upon their previous upbringing. As I will go on to explore, Nel acts as a virtuous married woman as her mother desired and Sula acts freely and sensually like her mother before. Although family background is significant, Morrison also uncovers how this itself has been shaped in response to a larger patriarchal and white-dominated world; that is to say, how the Peace and Wright households demonstrate different responses to similar constraints and difficulties.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Kathy J. Whitson, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 166.

<sup>43</sup> Eva endures physical hardship and sacrifice to maintain her family as a unit through a time of poverty and few opportunities, especially for African Americans, during and following the Depression. As a black single mother, her economic position is precarious and this demands much of her attention and energy. As she later explains to Hannah, she was not able to build a close emotional mother-child relationship with her children when the priority was to keep them alive. Eva’s choices differ from her next two generations, i.e. Hannah and Sula. Hannah can live an easier life without the fear of survival in the post-slavery era and Sula who lives between 1920s and 1940s can have a chance of going to a college and becoming an educated black woman. Their relationships as family members are affected by the political and economical changes. In turn, Nel’s mother, who has a more comfortable home, keeps a vigilant eye on her daughter in order to pre-empt and counteract any possible label as a ‘bad’ or disreputable black woman. Please also refer to my earlier discussion of economics, protection and attempts to refute stereotyping of black women as immoral via Patricia Hill Collins and Gerda Lerner on pp. 34-35.

Sula and Nel are presented as one and the same before Nel's marriage. Their friendship is a safe refuge to escape the forms of lovelessness of their respective homes. Interestingly in terms of female homosociality, both girls lack a close, affectionate mother figure. Eva, Sula's grandmother, sacrificed a leg to make an insurance claim for her children, but after killing her drug addict son and Hannah's question about whether she has ever loved them, we come to know that Eva does not love them in a conventional way at all. Hannah, Sula's mother, also being deprived of her mother's intimacy, cannot bestow love upon Sula and consequently Sula for much of the novel cannot love anyone other than herself. Their household is a community of women living together but this example of a matriarchal family lacks the affection and compassion with which most female society is normally perceived to be filled. Nel's mother's home is a household in which the husband/father's presence is not felt much because of his long absences. In this house, which can be seen as another space of female homosociality, however, there is little female bonding or friendship between mother and daughter. Helene, who has never experienced her own parents' presence in her life and has been guarded against showing any likeness to her disreputable mother, tries hard to deprive Nel of any individuality. Both girls thus emerge from backgrounds that are lacking in some way. In Sula's example, we notice how Morrison portrays the impact of the wider patriarchal and racist society on her home, showing that even generations after slavery African Americans still suffer economic disadvantage and social vulnerability. These relationships suggest a pattern of family survival (Eva sacrificing her leg), or anxiety about respectability (throughout Nel's upbringing), in a hostile context taking precedence over affectionate expressions or attempts to live up to idealized images of 'loving' nuclear family units. If we consider *Jazz's* adult Violet and Alice as extended characters of Sula and Nel, we

notice that Violet also lacks a nurturing mother-daughter relationship since her mother goes insane in an oppressive sharecropping South. On the other hand, Alice is raised in a family where any physical and sensual life is forbidden and, like Nel, she yields to the gender norm while stealthily admiring more permissive versions of womanhood and sexuality.

After a journey to New Orleans, where Nel comes to know more about her disreputable grandmother and her roots, and after witnessing her mother's fragility against a white conductor on the segregated train, young Nel starts to transgress. She is now more conscious of the way she has been brought up under the strict vigilant eyes of her mother and her choices for her future life. On her return she stands in front of a mirror:

She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. "I'm me," she whispered. "Me." Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear (*S*, pp. 52-3).

From this point on, Nel tries to assert her own identity. She cannot unthinkingly follow her mother's footsteps after she discovers her flaws and fear. She wants to achieve her 'me-ness' and this gives her power and joy. Her journey towards self-actualization starts here, as marked by her almost simultaneous meeting of Sula. In fact '[t]he trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother' (*S*, p. 53). Nel starts to disobey her mother after meeting Sula, for example stopping wearing a

clothespin at night in order to gain a well-shaped nose that her mother believes she should want. She learns transgression from Sula and Sula feels comfort in Nel's presence. They have a mutual admiration and love for each other and share almost all their time together. While enjoying each other's company, they can forget about everything and 'watch [...] each day as though it was a movie arranged for their amusement' (*S*, p. 55). However, Nel's early process of self-assertion is interrupted with her marriage to Jude and it stops there. Sula on the other hand follows her dreams and can assert her 'me-ness' as an adult in the wider society. Perhaps the character of Nel as a young girl who aspires to have an identity is further explored through the positive figure of Felice in *Jazz*, who learns from Violet how to sustain a developed and self-defined identity.

It is intriguing that the description of Sula, after whom the novel is named, is delayed until the fourth chapter. The narrator keeps the reader in suspense and does not reveal anything about Sula until the chapter on her friendship with Nel. This might represent the significance of the early bonding which shapes their personalities. The chapter begins not with an account of the start of their relationship but with an incident in which the two girls go to an ice cream parlour. The narrator offers their happy and casual trip for ice cream partly as seen through the 'panther eyes' of the black men of their community. The significance of this episode is not revealed until one takes a look at it through feminist lenses. The two girls are regarded as mere sexual objects by the black men sitting by the street, here representing the wider male world and male gaze. In a tentative awareness of this, the girls tread cautiously so as to avoid the 'merest toe stub', which would throw them into welcoming 'creamy haunches spread wide' (*S*, p. 56). It seems the male gaze beckoning them is only resistible while they are together. Once Nel later decides to yield to such a male desire, they both make a mess in

their relationships with men. This scene is the harbinger of sexual awakening within patriarchy in these two girls and they are thus thrilled by the attention, even at being called “pig meat” (*S*, p. 57). Yet this instance of sexual objectification is something shared, at this point something still manifesting their impervious unity.

Years later when Sula loses her lover Ajax, who once watched from the street, she remembers her happy trips to the ice cream parlour with Nel. Again, the narrative recalls the fact that the girls were considered by the men of the neighborhood as sexual objects, and that they shared a certain sense of delight at the attention. Sula’s mind goes back to the happy days she once shared with Nel:

The drugstore was where Edna Finch’s Mellow House used to be years back when they were girls. Where they used to go, the two of them, hand in hand, for the 18-cent ice-cream sundaes, past the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where the sprawling men said “pig meat,” and they sat in that cool room with the marble-top tables and ate the first ice-cream sundaes of their lives (*S*, p. 210).

All she remembers of their childhood is an innocent picture of two girls experiencing the world around them together. Sharing joy and love, they used to be ‘one and the same’ (*S*, p. 58-59). Through these two accounts the narrative bridges the encounter and Sula’s later memory of it in a clever, effective way and I will return to this aspect later.

The narrator does not tell us much about the girls’ friendship after Chicken Little’s

death and there is a narrative gap between this incident and Nel's marriage. Chicken Little's accident proved a horrible confrontation with mortality, but it might also represent a male force that is unsuccessful in interfering in their private relationship. Interestingly, the description of their young friendship is ended by two deaths: the death of Chicken Little, which may symbolise an unsuccessful male intrusion, and the death of Hannah, Sula's carefree mother. These two deaths may foreshadow the death of their friendship when Nel marries Jude. Nel aspires to be regarded as one kind of self, joining the ranks of respectability, and by doing so she loses the company of Sula. As I will examine next, Sula and Nel's friendship and bonding are suspended by Nel's substituting of Jude for Sula. After a male force finally triumphs over their female bonding, Sula leaves Nel and heads off to find the way into her adult future on her own.

### **The Disruption of Female Bonding Between Sula and Nel in Adulthood**

Nel's marriage opens a new chapter in her friendship with Sula and the heterosexual union is substituted for the primary female bonding between the girls. Before Nel's marriage, there are many instances which show that the girls are one and the same in thought and in their responses to the things around them. Further, Nel contemplates that 'talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself' (*S*, p. 95) and at the end of the novel where the epiphany occurs for Nel, Eva tells her "'just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you'" (*S*, p. 169). Yet the love and friendship shared between them is eroded bit by bit when they enter the adult world. Lisa Williams correctly points out that '[i]t is, therefore, not surprising that the rupture of Sula and Nel's friendship by their entry in adult



heterosexuality results in the inner death of Nel and the actual death of Sula'.<sup>44</sup> Nel's love for Jude turns into a grey web around her heart and Sula's sense of loss eventually causes her death. In the second part of the novel, Morrison reveals how Nel is attracted to Jude, whom she assumes will regard her individually, yet her aspiration to be singled out through him costs her a lot. She loses the company of her extended self, Sula, with whom she maybe could have nurtured her me-ness in the right way. As this chapter will go on to examine, the same mistake is made by Dorcas and Felice in *Jazz*. Dorcas, who aspires to be wanted by men, loses her earlier bonding with her female friend, Felice. As Felice mourns the loss of Dorcas, the last thing on the dying Dorcas's mind is her male lover Joe. Similarities and contrasts between the approaches to female homosociality in the two novels will be further discussed later.

Kevin Everod Quashie comments upon Sula leaving Nel's wedding party and claims that the fact that

the woman who is leaving is unnamed suggests that she is an icon of self. Surely a literal reading acknowledges that she is Sula or even that she represents the dissolution of Nel's union with Sula as a casualty of marriage. This woman might also be interpreted as Nel, as the textual apparition of the submission to Jude-ness. But the namelessness of her blue body is evocative and affords me the license to fantasize her as an entirely other body. She is a third term, an/other woman who manifests from the generosity of Sula and Nel's twoness and who each woman can

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<sup>44</sup> Lisa Williams, *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 103.

claim.<sup>45</sup>

Sula's departure initiates a gap in their friendship right after Nel's conformation to the social standard of marriage and choosing of Jude to complete her me-ness. As Quashie writes, the woman leaving Nel's wedding party might be another Nel who is departing from her. Here Sula could stand for all those aspirations for making her existence felt and becoming someone. Sula seeks after the dreams which both Nel and she herself aspire to achieve.

When Sula sleeps with Jude, Nel's husband, everyone, including Nel, regards it as an act of betrayal, but nobody condemns Nel for betrayal when she decides to be regarded solely, without her soul mate Sula. As I have mentioned above, the woman who walks away from Nel's wedding party is the manifestation of her hopes and desires to be someone distinct, an ability which, ironically, by marrying Jude she does not gain but loses. For the first time in her life Nel is regarded as an adult individual and she aims to be somebody and achieve self-realisation by marrying Jude. Yet Jude, who is a manifestation of patriarchy, wants someone to complete himself. As the narrator explains, 'Without her he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her, he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude' (S, p. 83). Jude, who has been denied a manly job — according to the standards of a patriarchal outlook — by a wider racist society, consequently is trapped in a job which he regards as more feminine than masculine. In an attempt to regain a masculine role he turns to marriage

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<sup>45</sup> Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un) becoming the Subject* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 21.

and a suitably compliant, ‘feminine’ local girl. Nel, as he observes, ‘had no aggression. Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter [...]. During all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula’ (*S*, p. 83). Even in this quote, although the main focus is on the beginning of the heterosexual relationship between Nel and Jude, Morrison makes her point clear by highlighting the value of the homosocial relationship between Nel and Sula.

Patrick Bjork observes:

Like Helene, Nel becomes exactly what the community wishes her to be. It is an all-too-familiar process of commodification wherein Nel is used for the gratification and reinforcement of patriarchal order. Unable to find employment and thus respectability, Jude imagines that being married to Nel can give him “some posture of adulthood.”<sup>46</sup>

He believes ‘that a wife can somehow fill the void of economic and emotional incompleteness in his life’ (*S*, p. 73). Nel wants to identify her individuality within a heterosexual relationship, which is mostly impossible in a patriarchal society. Not only does her individuality vanish in the marriage but also she loses the one with whom she could be an individual. As Morrison indicates directly, Sula is the one with whom Nel could have flourished and gained an independent identity, escaping the suppression which her family

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<sup>46</sup> Patrick Bryce Bjork, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 82.

imposes on her.

Janice G. Raymond discusses a solution for the female bonds lost for the sake of heterosexual relationships, writing that

Under hetero-order, women have not been self-ordered. Many women have led disordered lives, failing to put men in their proper place in relation to their selves. Therefore, a most essential task of recovering the origins of female friendship is to restore prime order. Women must set in order an existence of our own making in which our affections are self-directed and where we are truly prime to each other.<sup>47</sup>

She correctly points out that the relationship between women is as essential as the heterosexual relationship and one should not be sacrificed for the sake of the other. Usually women sacrifice their homosocial desires in order to achieve heterosexual bonding, but unconsciously they sacrifice their own voice and direction in this process. Likewise here Nel's marriage drives a wedge in the friendship between Sula and Nel. Sula walks out of their shared existence since Nel is unable to keep 'prime order' and her priority changes. Ironically, the entrance of a male presence is not by force here but rather Nel, like her mother, chooses to comply to norms by getting married and so ruins her female friendship. She sacrifices her young female bond for an idea of romance that does not last forever. Likewise, Dorcas, unaware of the valuable connection she has with Felice, prefers her adventurous

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<sup>47</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex, 2001), p. 43.

relationships with men and faces the impoverishing consequences.

As soon as Nel gets married, Sula walks away to find a comrade somewhere else but eventually all her attempts result in disappointment. Being deprived of familial love and affection, Sula seeks them in her young friendship with Nel. Since the adult Nel has chosen the company of someone else, there is no room left for Sula. Helena Michie discusses how the institution of marriage affects the girls' relationship in such a way that their conversation and mutual comprehension changes, as evidenced by reactions to Sula's sex with Jude. She writes 'Neither of them can understand the other: Sula is bewildered by what she feels to be Nel's possessiveness, while Nel cannot comprehend what she feels as a betrayal by her best friend. The institution of marriage has changed the tone, indeed precluded, the "conversation with herself.'" (167). Michie further adds that her reading does not imply that if the setting was outside of this patriarchal system, the girls would feel differently, but that they would respond to this event in a less institutionalized manner. As Michie points out, it is the social norm which shapes people's reaction toward a perceived transgression.

Nel's response to Sula's act is the kind of reaction which society dictates that she should show; but Sula's reaction to Nel's anger is what her instincts tell her to show. As Sula ponders:

She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line he used with one and then the other. Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house

with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes, she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. She knew well enough what other women said and felt, or said they felt. But she and Nel had always seen through them. They both knew that those women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs (*S*, pp. 180-81).

Being raised in a household where all kinds of men were welcome and women were authorities in selecting the right lover according to their taste, Sula feels confused when she confronts Nel's anger and hatred. Sula can understand the possessiveness of other women but when it comes to Nel she is shocked. As Sula is an independent character, she cannot comprehend that Nel, who used to be almost like her, now acts like others and mourns her ensuing loneliness. Sula used to single out Nel from conformist adult women, whose only job and entire role in their lives revolves around a man and keeping the man, but she now sees that Nel has become one of them. At this stage, Sula does not understand the depth of the miseries she brings into Nel's life. Jude deserts Nel with three children and all the responsibilities of the household now weigh on Nel's shoulders. A more positive point is that Sula unintentionally pushes Nel into being an independent and strong woman. Nel finds a good job in the hotel where Jude used to work and so symbolically she fills the gap that Jude left behind. She manages to raise her children all by herself without being dependent on someone else's help. In her argument with Sula, on Sula's deathbed, Nel asserts that men are worth keeping but Sula responds that she never tried to keep a man thinking that he was worth it - and the only time she tried to do so she lost the man - so remaining defiant.

Sula indirectly teaches Nel an invaluable lesson on being independent. Sula is self-sufficient and she claims she does not need someone else to fill any gap in her life, while on the other hand Nel, following mainstream expectations, thinks that keeping a man guarantees her happiness. When Sula thinks about Nel in the past she recalls that she was the one person who used to be different towards her:

Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of *that*. Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits. Now Nel was one of *them* (S, p. 181).

This is what Sula does not want for Nel. She does not want her best friend to follow the accepted, dysfunctional norm, being possessive and dependent, defined by the relationship with a man. Sula may hurt Nel for a short period but at the end Nel comes to know that their female friendship was more valuable than her 'ownership' of a man who left her for no good reason.

Quite paradoxically Sula, who discharges herself from the bond with Nel since she regards her as having become one of *them*, is herself then entangled in the trap of possession later in the novel. With Ajax, for the first time in her life Sula wants to hold onto a man and when her lover leaves her she experiences deep misery. Sula's character becomes problematic here since up to this point the reader regards her as a totally self-sufficient, strong woman

who condemns others for being possessive. It is unsettling when she herself is entrapped in this desire, apparently transformed and no longer functioning as a defiant heroine.

The ice cream parlour trips in which Sula and Nel were at the cusp of sexual awakening offer a contrast and so highlight the failure of both in establishing successful adult heterosexual relationships. As she remembers her girlhood, Sula now feels disappointed; she has shared her life and bed with a man whose real name, Ajax, had remained unknown to her throughout the relationship. The man who they were thrilled by as youngsters, and with whom now Sula comes to know a sense of possession, appears to be beyond her reach. Ajax is the first man who rejects Sula and leaves her just at the point when she seeks to hold on to him in her love. When Sula reviews her memories of Ajax she is disappointed that she did not know better the man for whom she cared. Since names often symbolize identities, here one can infer that Sula has never come to know the identity and nature of Ajax properly. She recalls:

Even then, when she and Nel were trying hard not to dream of him and not to think of him when they touched the softness in their underwear or undid their braids as soon as they left home to let the hair bump and wave around their ears, or wrapped the cotton binding around their chests so the nipples would not break through their blouses and give him cause to smile his slipping, falling smile, which brought the blood rushing to their skin. And even later, when for the first time in her life she had lain in bed with a man and said his name involuntarily or said it truly meaning *him*, the name she was screaming and saying was not his at all (*S*, pp. 203-04).



This memory evokes their young thrill at the men on the street but also their former distance as a self-contained adolescent unit. Sula's later adult sexual encounters are transitory, except for her fall into more conventional patterns with Ajax. We could say that Sula fails as a feminist heroine, in terms of being independent of men, at this point. She appeared to be a strong, self-sufficient and non-conformist woman throughout the novel, but when she falls for Ajax, she transforms into a new character, more like the community's other women that she previously dismissed. She reflects:

When I was a little girl the heads of my paper dolls came off, and it was a long time before I discovered that my own head would not fall off if I bent my neck. I used to walk around holding it very stiff because I thought a strong wind or a heavy push would snap my neck. Nel was the one who told me the truth. But she was wrong. I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls (*S*, pp. 204-05).

Here the dolls can be considered as symbols of the fragility of womanhood. Sula tries hard not to be like her dolls, and other women, and goes through life on guard against this but in the end she loses her head by falling in the trap of heterosexual love and possession. Here she points out that the one who saved her from her earlier delusional fear is her female friend, Nel, who told her the truth; but as Sula realises, this truth from Nel does always not help and ultimately they both succumb to the same trap. In Ajax Morrison chooses an equal counterpart for Sula as she is not an ordinary female character. She is rebellious, she is non-

conformist and she is powerful and in this Ajax proves her mirror. For example, his dream of aeroplanes and flying shows his aspiration towards growth and elevation. Yet it seems that since both of them do not fit into conventional definitions of heterosexual partnership, they cannot have a lasting relationship. Morrison temporarily magnifies Sula's shortcomings by placing her beside a male counterpart who is yet more independent and free to leave a possessive union in which Sula fails to keep him. Thus even Morrison's strong heroine is not idealised and through this episode comes to reveal the value of homosociality in her youth, to perhaps understand the adult Nel better and to reflect on the vulnerability expressed through the image of 'paper dolls'.

Sula and Nel both yield to the common standards of romance but eventually the value of their female bonding is revealed to them. Sula dies following a long conversation with Nel and posthumously feels relieved after this dialogue. Nel, on the other hand, comes to know that it was Sula and not Jude whom she lost and mourned for all these years. This epiphany may come to them late, but it reveals the main concern of the writer, which is female homosociality. Jude and Ajax appear in relatively short episodes of the women's lives and they both desert them. What remains for Nel and Sula is the friendship that they both did not understand the value and importance of in their life until too late.

Yet Sula and Nel's last conversation near the ending of the novel invites a closer reading, since Sula's last words reinforce the importance of female bonding as Morrison's central theme. When Nel comes to know that Sula is sick, she decides to pay her a visit notwithstanding the fact that they have spent years in isolation. Straight away Sula sends Nel to the drugstore to buy her much-needed painkiller and Nel obeys. This event shows how deep the bond between them was for, even after years apart, in their first encounter together

again they act as if they have seen each other just days before. They feel the old comfort and easiness in each other's company and realise what they neglected was the value of their friendship.

Sula reflects:

But it was good that this new medicine, the reserve, would be brought to her by her old friend. Nel, she remembered, always thrived on a crisis. The closed place in the water; Hannah's funeral. Nel was the best. When Sula imitated her, or tried to, those long years ago, it always ended up in some action noteworthy not for its coolness but mostly for its being bizarre. The one time she tried to protect Nel, she had cut off her own finger tip and earned not Nel's gratitude but her disgust. From then on she had let her emotions dictate her behaviour (*S*, p. 211).

Sula appreciates Nel's presence as a comrade in her life; in times of crisis Nel always showed strength. In the accidental drowning of Chicken Little or at her mother's funeral, Nel brought her solace by standing beside her. Unable to be like Nel in this behaviour, Sula's impulsive and feeling-directed life seems to be shaped by her early failure at imitation, the choice of another path determined only by inclination.

In their last conversation they return to the norms of society regarding men and women:

“You *can't* do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't.”

“You repeating yourself.”

“How repeating myself?”

“You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?”

“I don't think so and you wouldn't either if you had children.”

“Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children.”

“Some were taken.”

“Wrong, Nellie. The word is 'left.'” (S, p. 214).

Nel repeats what society dictates and Sula rejects what is accepted as convention. Yet Sula's freedom in choice is what hurts her fellows, something in turn repeated by Ajax. What really outrages Nel and the whole society is the way Sula chooses to live, that is entirely as she wishes. They partly envy Sula since they have been oppressed doubly as women and coloured, definitions about which Sula does not care. Nel condemns Sula's outrageous act of behaving like a man and Sula claims that even if she had children she would do as men do in irresponsibly leaving their families. Nel insists on the fact that some men are 'taken', referring to Sula's betrayal, which she thinks took Jude away. Sula still does not accept this account, defiantly putting emphasis on the word 'left' to convey her meaning. She wants to

show Nel that it was not her fault that Jude departed. He left Nel by his free will and no one forced him to do so. Ashamed of his actions, he did not dare to stay and apologise and compensate for the wrong he did to Nel. Only later in the novel, after Sula's death, does Nel come to know what Sula meant to her.

One cannot consider Sula and Nel's adult relationship without taking into consideration the community as the moulder of their interaction during this period. The relationship during their childhood was a refuge from the families and community in which they lived. When they were together nothing would or could interrupt them. Yet, as soon as Nel submits to normative standards as a 'good woman' they cannot be alone any more. Their relationship is increasingly determined by the wider social environment. Nel unconsciously tries to imitate her respectable mother and struggles to be a virtuous wife, pushing all her aspirations underground by identifying herself in a marriage. This reality hurts Sula especially when she finds out that Nel has become one of the community's conformists. After her 'betrayal' Nel behaves in a way that others expect her to and this causes Sula pain. Nel was one of the reasons for her return and from all her journeys to different cities and encounters with different people she has come to know that 'a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman' (*S*, p. 121). The female bond which she once had with Nel motivates her to come back to the Bottom, but this union is divided by a male force now and there is no room left for her.

Patrick Bryce Bjork writes that:

Nel, for her part, willingly wishes to be an objectified nonentity; she finds solace

in the stereotype of the loving, dutiful wife precisely because she, too, seeks protection from Nature, Time, and the unexpectedness of Death. In *Sula*, however, Morrison creates a character who wishes to break free from this social cycle of denial and certitude (73).

As Bjork points out, Nel, when confronting the choices of rebellion and safety, chooses the latter one and suffocates all her childhood wishes. She prefers to stay safe as a ‘nonentity’ rather than break free and take a risk by going against the mainstream; on the other hand, Sula, her extended self, is intrepid enough to deny all the established standards and experiment with her life. For Sula, living a mundane life is like hell, while for Nel any change in her life is hell. Nel pushes all her dreams about finding a ‘me-ness’ underground to live passively as a conformist. This signals a failure in finding the way toward making her existence felt. She might have done better if she had kept her bond with Sula primary, as Bjork suggests:

With Sula she had attempted to discover herself through experience, and thus, for a time, she had circumvented the survivalist confines of the Bottom. With Sula, Nel may have continued to explore her potentialities; she may have transformed her life; and if she and her community had tried to understand Sula’s call, they may have responded with their own imaginative attempts toward creative action and perhaps broken the bonds of a sexist, introjected order (82).

In the Bottom society women suffer more because they do not have the same rights and choices as men. In such a patriarchal system, men have the prerogative to walk away and leave their family whenever they want, just as Boy-Boy and Jude or even Ajax do, but women are more likely to stay and suffer. The women are left alone and have to take the whole responsibility for raising their children single-handedly. In such a condition, child rearing is under pressure and seems a desperately hard job. This may explain why most of the mothers introduced in the novel cannot feel full affection toward their children.<sup>48</sup> Women in this community are oppressed by the wider white society and by the patriarchal values of their own black society. Eva, who sacrifices her leg because of economic circumstances, is a prime example of this. Given such double marginalization, no one can understand the women's position and hurt better than their own peers. In harsh times, Morrison suggests only a female friendship can bring a woman the needed affection and solace as she tackles life's problems, something reinforced when Sula comes to know that 'a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman' (*S*, p. 121).

Both Nel and the Bottom community fail in understanding Sula's worth as a yardstick with which they could measure and define their own importance in life. When Sula comes back to the Bottom, to her roots, indirectly, she brings love and care to the community. The mothers care about their children more and the wives pamper their husbands more for the fear of losing the battle with Sula. Nel observes the sparkle Sula brings back to her life and, of course, the laughs which she has not shared since she got married. This is significant

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<sup>48</sup> For more historical information about black family structures and parental roles, please refer to Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984).

because it shows that Nel can only be really happy when she is enjoying moments with Sula as a female friend. The revived situation, however, is short-lived; as soon as Sula is gone, the locals go back to their previous way of life. As the narrator comments, the ‘tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid despair [...]. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity’ (*S*, p. 154). Neither Nel nor the women of the Bottom come to know the value of a female friendship or the example of nonconformist femininity which could assist them in achieving a richer life.

Morrison deals with positive and negative female relationships in *Sula* simultaneously. The reader encounters the help of Mrs Suggs, a neighbor who looks after Eva’s children during harsh times for eighteen months, and the burial ceremony for Hannah performed by the community women, ‘who washed the body and dressed it for death, wept for her burned hair and wrinkled breasts as though they themselves had been her lovers’ (*S*, p. 77). On the other hand, the loveless households of Eva Peace and Helene Wright, or the grudge the Bottom women bear against Sula, demonstrate a failure of nurture or portray female hostility which is sometimes more highlighted than female friendship. As Sula’s prophecy comes true at the end, people start missing her after her death. She once claimed “‘Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me”” (*S*, p. 145), offering a long speech about how after all the taboos of the community have been broken, people will value her. Sula was alone in her behaviour and people could single her out and say that she acted wrongly, but here Morrison indicates that when a radical behaviour becomes a normative one, there will be no more objections. People detest Sula because, as Nel points out, she is a woman and wants to act like a man. She wants to be as free as a man of the



community who follows his own dreams. Since she is black and she is a woman in this society, such a liberty leads to pariahdom and is denied to her.

Returning to one of the complexities of the novel, Sula would never come to know Nel's hurt about losing Jude, and her assumed picture of an ideal family, without her relationship with Ajax. After Ajax left Sula, she understood a depth of loss which she had never experienced before. Bjork suggests '[i]n Ajax's absence, Sula, like Nel, experiences the similar pain of loss and change. She, too, cannot now deny her membership to the community as she comes to realize that in her possessiveness, she had never known Ajax's full name [...]. Adding this loss to Sula's isolation heightens her sense that she has "sung all the songs" [...] in her life, and therefore there is nothing left to do but die.' (78). The feeling of loss is in some senses at last the manifestation of her conformity to heterosexual union and social convention. Yet, as I have examined, even as she faces death, Sula remains defiant and retains her own perspective.

The conversation between Eva and Nel at the ending of the novel is a crucial episode which helps Nel in finding the ultimate truth. Nel pays a visit to Eva in the old age home and there Eva enables the epiphany to occur. When Eva tells her that she was as guilty for Chicken Little's drowning as Sula, Nel strongly denies her engagement in the child's death. Eva answers her "'You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched'" (S, p. 251). Eva reminds Nel that she has 'watched' the incident and although she did not participate in Chicken Little's death directly, she tacitly enjoyed the occurrence. As Nel contemplates later that day:

All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula's frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little's body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment (S, p. 254).

At this point Nel comes to know that she condoned Sula's letting go by just standing silently by her side and even recalls a thrill. She also reviews her behaviour during the past years and comes to the realisation that the socially accepted role which made her seem like a well-mannered, virtuous woman was only a fake mask. When Nel steps back and thinks about her life and her friendship with Sula with greater perspective, she once more values her bond with Sula. Now that the vanity of social respectability and the farce of the standards of perfect womanhood are revealed to her, she can accept her friend's ideas and deeds with open arms. It is years after Sula's death that Nel comes to know how she wasted her life and energy in loathing her friend for the sake of a man.

The scene when a shocked Nel finally understands how she lost Sula is memorable:

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry — loud and long — but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow (*S*, pp. 259-60).

Nel and Sula never had the chance to renew their friendship properly after Nel's marriage to Jude. Sula leaves the town and when she comes back she apparently betrays Nel by sleeping with Jude. Their intimacy ceases from this point on and only years after Sula's death does Nel find out how precious their friendship was. They could have lived their life hand in hand but they wasted it searching for a male lover as a comrade. As the novel moves from girlhood to adulthood and back to memories of youth, supportive love through female homosociality emerges.

The only relationship which endures to the end of the novel is the female friendship between Nel and Sula. Sometimes in *Sula* it does not work but at the very close the importance of the relationship is revealed to Nel as a kind of epiphany. Nel comes to know that all these years it was Sula whom she missed, not Jude. Jude was an obstacle between these two women. Indeed he unintentionally functions as a tool of a patriarchal society which weakens women by keeping them far from each other, physically and/or emotionally. The friendship works well when Nel and Sula are young since it is a compensation for the lack in their relationships with their mothers and a unity or refuge within a hostile community. As soon as they enter adulthood, their friendship is affected by the social norm. Since Sula is always the doer and Nel the watcher, as we see in the incident of Chicken Little's death or even Sula's betrayal, Sula leaves the town to experiment and find a 'me-ness' outside of this established world while Nel stays and conforms. Nel could find the identity she desires if she

forged her own path like Sula, or if she and Sula kept their friendship as it was when they were young. Yet the dominant order of the society dictates to Nel how to react toward Sula's betrayal and it separates them for a long period. Perhaps if Nel had talked to Sula sooner, as she does alone at the end, they could have helped each other to flourish and they would both be life-sustaining and enhancing as sometimes female friends are.

### **Cross-Generational Female Homosociality in Jazz**

*Jazz*, Toni Morrison's sixth novel, reveals a new musically-inflected narrative technique as well as encompassing a distinctive period in African American history — the Harlem Renaissance. The main female homosocial relationship in this novel is presented by Morrison in an unusual way. Two middle-aged women accidentally form a bond which helps both to come out of their comfort zone, change damaging patterns and see the world differently. Meanwhile, the complicated friendship between two young girls — Felice and Dorcas — is also introduced by Morrison and, at the same time, a cross-generational and fruitful relationship is depicted in the connection between Felice and Violet. The narrative of *Jazz* mainly focuses on the story of a dead girl whose lover, Joe Trace, shot her to try to keep her. Joe, who is a married man and almost thirty years older than Dorcas, shoots her out of his sense of previous rejection as well as possession. He feels guilty since he is betraying his wife and yet he feels possessive and resentful when he sees Dorcas dancing with boys of her own age. Afterwards, Joe's wife, Violet, is compelled to gather every bit of information that she can about Dorcas. In this quest she meets the dead girl's aunt, Alice Manfred. The relationship between these two middle-aged women helps both to overcome the tragic events and enhance their stance towards and experience of life.

The opening page of the novel is pivotal in telling the whole story in a nutshell. This paragraph contains the whole plot:

He [Joe Trace] fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deep down, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the dead girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of church [...] when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you."<sup>49</sup>

These opening lines reveal the centre of *Jazz* is apparently the story of Violet and Joe Trace while several other characters contribute their parts in events. After the funeral, Violet tries to punish the heartbroken Joe by luring a boyfriend home and taking him to bed while Joe is there. The main narrator comments: 'Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say. He may have come to feel that Violet's gifts were poor measured against his sympathy for the brokenhearted man in the next room' (J, p. 7). Her second resolution was to love Joe again and meanwhile collect all the information she can about the girl who stole her husband. In this way Violet tries to figure out what she lacks that caused her husband to find a substitute for her.

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<sup>49</sup> Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992) (London: Vintage Books, 2005), p. 5.

It is noteworthy here that the opening lines lead the reader's mind to focus on a heterosexual relationship and the lost romance between a married couple. The narrator intrigues the reader by luring them to follow the love story of Joe and Violet; but in fact the romance is of secondary importance in the novel. What is further highlighted and explored is a wide variety of connections and relationships among female characters. The mother-daughter relationship is portrayed in the connections between True Belle and Rose Dear, Rose Dear and Violet, Felice and her mother, and Dorcas and her mother. Female friendship is also shown through the bond between Dorcas and Felice and the most significant female connection, which is the relationship that grows between Alice and Violet. Compellingly, the female homosociality among all these pairs is examined in different time frames and settings, thus the reader is able to compare these connections each in a distinct time and place. One of the positive outcomes of these bonds is the new maturity which the reader observes in the character of Felice, something due to her relation with Violet who is as old as her mother. Thus Morrison in this novel shows that age differences do not hinder the blossoming of female bonds. As in *Sula*, female homosociality is again portrayed as functional and dysfunctional at the same time in this novel. I will now turn to examine these female connections more closely, beginning with that between the mature Violet and Alice.

After finding Dorcas's home address, Violet tries to begin a relationship with Alice Manfred, the girl's grieving aunt. Alice is reluctant to let Violet, who disrupted her niece's funeral, in her house for nearly two months, but once in March she lets her in and their encounter invites a more detailed reading. Their first conversation begins:

“What could you want from me?”

“Oh, right now I just want to sit down on your chair,” Violet said.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t think what good can come of this.”

“I’m having trouble with my head” (J, p. 80).

These lines unfold what Violet really needs (a resting place) and from what she really suffers (mental disturbance). It is not only Joe’s marital betrayal or rejection which troubles her; it is finding a place to relax and settle herself when her head is muddled that is the problem. Earlier the narrator briefly comments on Violet’s strange character: ‘the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them’ (J, p. 4). Here it is worth explaining that Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, committed suicide when Violet was a teenager. After her husband left and they were evicted from their house, Rose could not stand the pressure and gave up on life. Rose’s mother, True Belle, then returned to look after her daughter and her household. The significant mother-daughter relationship between True Belle and Rose will be discussed later in this chapter. As the narrator implies, since Violet has been deprived of a sustaining mother-daughter relationship she feels insecure, and yet she finds real comfort later in the novel by establishing a friendship with Alice Manfred. This bond can be considered as a parallel to the connection between Nel and Sula, which works as a compensation for the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship they both at times experienced.

To examine Alice’s character in more detail, her background as well as her own upbringing of Dorcas is revealing. Alice is raised in a family where pregnancy out of wedlock

is regarded as a sin and her parents strictly discipline her and her sisters in such a way that they cannot enjoy their own sexuality and womanhood.

They spoke to her firmly but carefully about her body: sitting nasty (legs open); sitting womanish (legs crossed); breathing through her mouth; hands on hips; slumping at table; switching when you walked. The moment she got breasts they were bound and resented (J, p. 76).

Since Alice has been brought up this way, she always sees men as a threat and her last name 'Manfred' may even signal someone who fears men. She tries not to pass these strict teachings onto anyone else but ironically she becomes the voice of these values for Dorcas. She restricts the young girl and tries to teach her to avoid men and live unobtrusively in the hem of society. She disapproves of revealing modern dress but in private admires sensual city clothes. Interestingly, Alice, who is the mouthpiece of restriction, feels free and limitless only when she is alone with Violet:

The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people. With Violet she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy (J, p. 83).



Alice can be regarded as a parallel character to Nel in *Sula*. Nel herself was brought up under the vigilant eyes of a strict mother and aspired to find a me-ness beyond what her mother taught her. Like Alice she succumbs to her mother's teachings but at the end via Sula she gains self-awareness. Alice shows her true unconstrained free self when she is with Violet. It is with Violet that she realises that her fear of supposedly 'nasty' coloured women is false. The epiphany comes to her that once in her own life she was one of those armed coloured women of whom she is now always afraid and from whom she wanted to keep Dorcas away.

Her true self is revealed to her when she argues with Violet over the prostitutes whose hair Violet does. Violet tries to convince Alice that these women are "like us" and Alice cannot accept the similarity (J, p. 84). Alice tells Violet that she is afraid of these 'bad' women since they are always fighting and she disapproves of their street lives: "no woman should live like that" (J, p. 84). Violet replies: "No. No woman should have to" (J, p. 84). Violet points out a very significant issue here. Alice, who condemns other women for being sex workers or being violent, reproaches Violet for carrying a knife at Dorcas's funeral. Violet answers that she was not born with a knife and her circumstances forced her to act in madness at that moment. By her pivotal question, Violet unconsciously prompts an epiphany for Alice, asking: "wouldn't you? You wouldn't fight for your man?" (J, p. 85). Now Alice realises that once she was thirsty for blood like other wronged women who, faced with limited gender roles, fight for the possession of a man.

Every day and every night for seven months she, Alice Manfred, was starving for blood. Not his. Oh, no. For him she planned sugar in his motor, scissors to his ties, burned suits, slashed shoes, ripped socks. Vicious, childish acts to inconvenience

him, remind him. But no blood. Her craving settled on the red liquid coursing through the other woman's veins (J, p. 86).

What is revealed to Alice in her conversation with Violet is that even she can become one of those women of whom she is afraid. They are forced to live like this, their existences shaped by men, and, just like them, once Alice yearned to act the same, though she did not dare admit her true fierce feelings. As the narrative unfolds, what connects Violet Trace and Alice Manfred is that both become obsessed and want to fight for the men they suppose they possess. Their flaw is not recognising that their own husbands are just as guilty as those rival women. They try to keep their men, whom they value as worth it, by fighting with other women whom they consider to lack all value. They are not aware of the precious bonding they could establish with other women, no longer only valuing men, in order to improve their own lives and understanding. Just as Nel does, Alice sacrifices potential female bonds for her heterosexual relationship. At the end she comes to know the value of this homosociality through her unexpected, middle-aged friendship with Violet.

During various visits, Alice, with a motherly attention, stitches Violet's raggedy clothes and shows care toward Violet. On the other hand, Violet pushes Alice to realize her own inner self and thoughts better than before. They both render each other comfortable in their company together. The laughter and joy that Violet and Alice share shows how their connection helps each to feel free from the heavy burden of past events. Reinforcing this argument, Andrea O' Reilly in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* writes:

Alice is a seamstress: as she repairs the “loose running threads” and the “ripped lining” of Violet’s clothing, she mends the “so dark, so narrow” tear in Violet’s selfhood and stitches together the frayed pieces of her splintered subjectivity [...] In *Jazz*, one woman mothers another woman and returns her to her lost mother. Violet finds her mother’s garden because Alice, her friend, has shown her the way p. 159.

O’ Reilly argues that Alice and Violet play the role of ‘othermother’ for each other to compensate the loss which both suffer. I would like to add that the connection between Alice and Violet does not necessarily need to be a mother- daughter relationship. It can simply be female homosociality which plays out as an alternative to the lost mother- daughter relationship. The other important role that each of them plays in the other’s life is filling the internal gap and hollowness that both suffer from. Life in New York City, isolated in an apartment, is in contrast with Violet’s previous rural Southern home, where she used to sleep under a big walnut tree and worked alongside other African Americans in fields during the day. The isolation from community that Northern city life imposes on Violet contributes to her mental cracks and break down. Her friendship with Alice helps her to know more about her feelings and to heal her own recent and past wounds. The female homosociality which Violet and Alice recreate in the North recalls the belonging and community that they had before in the South, and it seems to help them recapture Southern values. The Harlem narrative present is set after the mass black migration of the early twentieth-century and Morrison thus depicts a neglected issue within female lives – more possibilities for traditional female homosociality in the South and the paucity of these in the modern urban North. It is also worth noting here that *Jazz* highlights the greater economic opportunities in New York

City that often motivated participation in the Great Migration, meaning that forms of isolation are offset against increased self-determination and financial independence. Paula Giddings describes this phenomenon in *When and Where I Enter*:

It is little wonder that when the opportunity presented itself, Black women, as well as men, left the South to find work at decent wages with better opportunities and a greater sense of dignity. When, between 1915 and 1920, the North beckoned, 500,000 Blacks heeded its call (141).

Although the North promises better incomes and a more dignified way of living, most black migrants experienced some disillusionment when unequal wages were discovered there. Still Morrison's novel captures the excitement of the 'New Negro' era and Harlem dwellers who are both more independent financially and suffering from a breaking of the communal bonds that characterised the South. Violet takes her freedom and laughter back only when she unites with Alice and benefits from female connection in the city. This is what Alice Walker in her 1970 article, 'The Black Writer and the Southern Experience', calls the 'sense of community' when she writes: 'What the black southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of *community*'.<sup>50</sup> Such belonging extends to the whole black community, and specifically women, in a southern context of established place, generational links and solidarity in the face of shared oppression. Those who experience this broad form of bonding while living in

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<sup>50</sup> Alice Walker, 'The Black Writer and the Southern Experience', in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 17.

the South often lose that connection when they move to the North, seeking better life opportunities through the Great Migration. In *Jazz*, Morrison offers a re-shaping of the sense of community as a remedy for the dislocations of the black diaspora.

Significantly there are two incidents in which Violet compares Alice to her grandmother True Belle: once when Alice is doing ironing and secondly when both women laugh together. The comparison of Alice to her grandmother shows Violet's deep affection toward Alice. Although she is the aunt of the girl who has stolen her husband, she feels comfort and ease in her company. Rather like True Belle, who cared for Rose's suffering family and brought fun and laughter back to their lives, Alice also reminds Violet of 'what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears' (J, p. 113). As Christa Albrecht-Crane writes:

This moment of mutual dissociation discloses to what extent identity is both constitutive and insufficiently defining. It certainly affects individuals in powerful, undeniable ways, making them into the subjects they are — black women struggling with the problems created by the social divisions around them [...] the laughter between these women indicates a sense of abandonment and excessiveness that manages to undo the traumatic effects of identity construction.<sup>51</sup>

When Violet finally laughs at what she did at the funeral, she overcomes her feelings towards that troubled event. She is now able to put rejection and rage out of her head and gradually

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<sup>51</sup> Christa Albrecht-Crane, 'Becoming Minoritarian: Post-Identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*', *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association*, 36/1 (2003), Pp. 56-73, p. 65.

enjoy her marriage again. Before this revelation she was lost and depressed but now through the help of Alice she is able to overcome trauma and breakdown.

As mentioned earlier, both Alice Manfred and Violet Trace benefit from their mature homosociality. Their connection begins with hostility and suspicion on Alice's part but little by little it turns out to be a strong friendship. Violet finds true love and care in her relationship with Alice, meanwhile Alice learns a lot from Violet. She comes to know that if she herself were forced to fight for life or for a man, she would act exactly like those fighting street women of whom she is always afraid. When Violet turns home from the drugstore where she has been thinking about the laughter she shared with Alice that morning, she feels spring has come to the city. The change of season is the harbinger of joy and happiness for both women. At the end of the novel the reader meets a more mature Violet and Joe who are living a happier life. They have overcome the alienation that city dwelling brought into their relationship and now they can fulfill a better existence. Even Alice Manfred moves back to a home city of which she has long been afraid. Both women overcome the breakdowns in their lives and they owe it to female homosociality, which enables them to gain self-knowledge and self-defined power once again. As I mentioned earlier, Alice and Violet can be helpfully viewed as living the extended lives of Nel and Sula from Morrison's earlier novel. In their middle age they embark on a more mature bonding which helps them both to improve their lives.

Another example of female connection, which appears on the periphery of the plot but is in fact a life-changing association, can be found in the young friendship between Dorcas and Felice. The reader does not learn much about Felice until close to the ending of the novel. The narrator talks about her here and there but her closeness to Dorcas is revealed late

in *Jazz*. Morrison postpones commenting on the two girls' friendship perhaps for the sake of the climax she wanted to achieve in the novel. The reader becomes familiar with the two girls' backgrounds and other connections and Dorcas's failure in a heterosexual relationship, and then the writer reveals the value of the female friendship of which they – especially Dorcas – have been ignorant. When Felice recalls the earlier days she spent with Dorcas, she considers them as once happy and 'good times' but 'it stopped, the good times, for a couple of months when she started seeing that old man' (J, p. 201). Felice initially plays an important role in helping Dorcas, who is restricted by Alice, socialize more and enjoy the company of people her own age. Others are surprised at the friendship because of the stark difference in their skin colour, such attitudes revealing colourist divisions within the Northern black community. When for the first time Felice takes Dorcas to a party, she helps her create a less conservative, more fashionable look, countering Alice's efforts. She is kind and supportive, having 'to chatter compliments all the way down Seventh Avenue to get Dorcas to forget about her clothes and focus on the party' (J, p. 65). While Felice tries her best to make Dorcas happy, on the other hand Dorcas seems less invested in their female bond. She is very insecure and uses other people to boost her self-esteem and get what she wants. Indeed, Morrison uncovers how Dorcas thinks she needs men's approval in order to have an identity.

Dorcas prefers the popular young man Acton over Joe Trace not only because of his age, but because Acton criticises her appearance and behaviour and she considers this attention to be caring. She rejects Joe on the basis that he does not assert control in this way, but in fact it is Joe who loves her regardless of what she wears or what gifts she brings for him. As Dorcas reflects, "he didn't even care what I looked like. I could be anything, do anything – and it pleased him. Something about that made me mad. I don't know" (J, p.

190). What Dorcas wants is to hide her inside hollowness and fit in. She wants to gain an identity by having a boyfriend who will arouse jealousy in her peers. The picture that she draws of Acton for the reader is not as ideal as she thinks:

Acton, now, he tells me when he doesn't like the way I fix my hair. Then I do it how he likes it. I never wear glasses when he is with me and I change my laugh for him to one he likes better [...] Joe didn't care what kind of woman I was. He should have. I cared. I wanted to have a personality and with Acton I'm getting one (J, p. 190).

The 'inside nothing', caused by past loss that she shared with Joe and 'filled for him, just as he filled it for her', was the reason that they came together (J, p. 38). Yet this emptiness is ignored by Acton, who tries to mould her character in a way that pleases him. Acton's way of criticizing and reforming Dorcas echoes the patriarchal order in a supremacist society. He wants to shape the girl's character and appearance to fit with what is valued as 'feminine' in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, Joe accepts Dorcas as she is. Both her romantic relationships with men fail, however, and finally it is her female friend who is by her side at her death bed. Joe reacts with violence when he fears he has lost her and Acton pays more attention to the party host's furniture than to the bleeding of his dying girlfriend. It is Felice whom she calls at the end to deliver a message for her and it is Felice who stays with her during her last moments. Yet this is not an idealised union as Felice feels betrayed as well, observing that Dorcas, even as she dies, uses her to relay a message to Joe. This resentment between women can only be articulated and dealt with at the end of the novel.



The young friendship of Felice and Dorcas echoes the relationship of Sula and Nel, who are another pair of girls whose bond is disrupted by the entrance of a male actor. Their friendship stops when Dorcas starts visiting Joe and is partially re-established later when Dorcas starts dating the younger Acton. Although a pair of girls features in both novels, there is an important difference between Dorcas and the adult Sula. Sula appears as an unconventional black woman who is self-dependent, strong and fearless. Although the reader may not condone some of her deeds, such as sleeping with her best friend's husband, at the same time one cannot deny her carefree and powerful charismatic character. On the other hand, the character of Dorcas arouses neither admiration nor sympathy. She considers the people around her as a means to achieve her goals in life. Dorcas and Felice's friendship ultimately does not nurture either of them. In this sense, the homosociality between these two fails since one of them, Dorcas, does not care about the importance of female connection. All she wants is to gain affirmation from men and see jealousy in other girls' eyes for having a boyfriend that they cannot have. Through this Morrison tries to portray the danger of sacrificing female homosociality for the sake of heterosexual convention. Once women are cut off from their female bonds, she suggests that they cannot be successful in their relationships to men as well.

Towards the end of *Jazz*, such relations are reworked and it is Felice who acts as a substitute in the triangle of Joe, Violet and Dorcas. Yet this time the love triangle is not based upon rivalry and betrayal but on affection and mutual help. Felice pays a visit to Joe and Violet's apartment after Dorcas's death and subsequently undergoes a change. The reason she dares to step in their house for the first time is to try to recover a ring that she lent Dorcas on the night she was shot. The ring had been given to her by her mother, whom Felice believes

originally stole it from a shop as a gesture of defiance after experiencing racism. Felice is reassured by Violet's friendship with Alice Manfred. She thinks that if Alice, who is known for her strict rules, lets Violet in her house then she is not dangerous for Felice either. Felice also comments on Violet's visits to Alice Manfred: "I can see why Mrs. Manfred let her visit. She doesn't lie, Mrs. Trace. Nothing she says is a lie the way it is with most older people. Almost the first thing she said about Dorcas was, 'she was ugly. Outside and in'" (J, p. 205). Felice appreciates Violet since she does not hide herself under a false mask. She is honest and does not let the pressures imposed by the wider society make her a liar like others. Felice is the one who brings some solace to the mourning Joe and tells him that he was the last one on Dorcas's mind before her death. Interestingly, Felice remains angry towards Dorcas. They were good friends until Dorcas took up with Joe and they broke up their female friendship for the sake of this new connection. Felice still feels mad at Dorcas since she believes Dorcas cold-heartedly used people, but Joe Trace explains to her that he saw the soft part of the dead girl who was not 'dry-eyed' after all (J, p. 212). Although this instance of young female bonding does not lead to mutual growth or equal sharing, Felice's development proves central to Morrison's wider picture.

Felice changes at the end of *Jazz*, not because of her friendship with Dorcas, but through establishing a relationship with Violet and Joe. We are shown them through her eyes:

I thought about the way Mr. Trace looked at me and the way his wife said 'me' [...] not like the 'me' was some tough somebody, [...] like somebody she favored and could count on. A secret somebody you didn't have to feel sorry for or have to fight for (J, p. 210).

The 'me' that Violet now tries her best to achieve is different from that Violet who suffered from mental breakdown and took hurtful retribution. She is more happy and powerful and she passes this experience on to Felice as a mother might. The 'me' that Violet has developed is far from the one who once succumbed to an idealized white standard of beauty and idolised Golden Gray, the blonde child described to her by her grandmother. This Violet has a new-found identity and is living her own life. Felice also wonders if she can acquire this 'me' like Violet. She contemplates that such a new identity is not just for show like Dorcas's character was. It is not something that you should be ashamed of, like the identity that Dorcas discovered in her relationship with Joe, but about which she was embarrassed. It is also not something that you have to fight for, like the identity that Dorcas thought she achieved by competing for Acton and winning him. This 'me' is not dependent on anyone else but comes from the inside. The me-ness here echoes Nel's aspiration in *Sula*, which is fulfilled by Felice through her cross-generational female bonding with Violet. Another benefit of Felice's late closeness with Violet is that Felice changes her attitude towards her mother and what she did to get the ring. This issue needs a close reading, which I will turn to when examining the relationship between Felice and her mother. Thus it seems that the brief friendship between Violet and Felice is more fruitful and nurturing than the one between Dorcas and Felice. To further understanding of Dorcas and Felice and the connection between them, it will be helpful to take a look at their social backgrounds and family upbringing.

Dorcas is raised under the strict watch of Alice Manfred, who limits the young girl's imagination and desires. She lost her father when she was five due to racial violence and her mother died five days later as a result of the same unrest. When she tells Joe about the slaps

she got from her mother, Dorcas vividly remembers the last one as it was on the night that her mother died. She recounts her experience to Joe:

About the slap across her face, the pop and sting of it and how it burned. How it burned, she told him. And of all the slaps she got, that one was the one she remembered best because it was the last [...] there was no getting in that house where her clothespin dolls lay in a row. In a cigar box. But she tried anyway to get them [...] yelled to her mother that the box of dolls, the box of dolls was up there on the dresser can we get them? Mama? (J, p. 38).

What Dorcas tells Joe about her memories of her mother is not affectionate but rather associated with discipline, and is scarred by the trauma of a brutal orphanhood. Dorcas's notion of a mother is as vague as Joe's, who has never seen his own mother, Wild. In this they both share their deepest secret, an inside nothing, with each other. They have both been deprived of a mother figure in their lives and what they remember from their mothers is wildness and/or cruelty. As her home burnt down, what the little girl Dorcas was obsessed with was her clothespin dolls in a cigar box. The displacement of her feelings for her mother onto them symbolises her distress and the disruption of family in a context of violent racial hatred.<sup>52</sup>

When the narrator poses Dorcas's apparently indifferent reaction to her mother's death, it potentially echoes the indifference of Sula to her mother's burning as well. The

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<sup>52</sup> The parents of Dorcas were both caught up in the racial violence against blacks that dominated 1919 and lost their lives to it.

figure of a girl watching her mother burn to death with dry eyes is repeated from *Sula* to *Jazz*, inviting the drawing of parallels. Even Dorcas's later use of men to achieve what she wants resembles Sula's self-centred relation to male lovers. However, what makes them different is that Sula uses and discharges men on her own terms, whereas Dorcas uses one man to attain the other one and to fulfill a patriarchally-defined role. Sula is totally self-dependent but Dorcas gets her identity through her relationships with men. Morrison's narrative works eventually to reveal that what Dorcas seeks in her life is the lost love she has never had in her relationship with her mother and father. Even Alice, who loves the girl, cannot show Dorcas her real affection under the mask of strictness which she puts on. When Dorcas falls in love with a man thirty years older than herself it shows how desperately she needs parental love and attention.

In turn, Felice lives with her grandmother since her parents have to work in another city. As a young girl she is not happy with the amount of time her parents spend with her:

I would see them once every three weeks for two and a half days, and all day Christmas and all day Easter. I counted. Forty-two days if you count the half days – which I don't, because most of it was packing and getting to the train – plus two holidays makes forty-four days, but really only thirty-four because the half days shouldn't count. Thirty-four days a year (J, p. 198).

Later on she tells Dorcas that out of the seventeen years that she has lived, she has seen her parents only for two-and-a-half years. Accurately counting each day that she has spent with

her parents shows how lonely she is and how desperately she is in need of nurture in a similar way to Dorcas. Both girls suffer in the same way yet, instead of sustaining each other, one supposes the heterosexual relationship is that which can give her what she lacks and the other grows angry and resentful. Felice feels sad when she finds out that even at the very last moment of her life Dorcas was thinking about Joe and not her. Her sudden declaration that she is not like Dorcas to Joe and Violet surprises them, but Morrison gives the reader the insight that she is determined to avoid Dorcas's solution of definition through man.

After several visits to Joe and Violet's house and recounting what happened to Dorcas on that night, Felice comes to know that she is pleased that Dorcas was buried with her ring. Her realisation shows that she has overcome her negative feeling about Dorcas and forgiven her. She owes this to Joe and Violet, who play the parental role for her during this pivotal period of time. Like a fatherly figure, Joe listens to her carefully and discusses issues with her, unlike her work-worn father who shouts at her. Like a mother, Violet cooks for her and wants to trim her hair, unlike her real mother who, in her limited holiday time, wants to go out dancing, leaving the young Felice feeling neglected. What Violet indirectly teaches her about forging a fulfilling identity is priceless. Near the end of the novel, the reader encounters a new Felice who is more powerful than before: "My mother wants me to find some good man to marry. I want a good job first. Make my own money. Like she did. Like Mrs. Trace" (J, p. 204). Felice does not want to live as a dependent woman and wants to make her own life. She also plans to improve her relationship with her mother after visiting Violet and Joe. Until now she has been ashamed of her mother's act of stealing the ring and lying to her. But she comes to know how hard it was for her respectable mother "breaking her rules for once. But I'll tell her I know about it, and that it's what she did, not the ring, that I really love" (J,

p. 215). Felice now understands that her mother's act of theft was also rebellion in the face of discrimination and she admires her for that. She wants to be somebody by finding a good job and seeks to reject conventional and patriarchal values. Felice's promising future is partially shaped by the teachings of Violet and Joe as they rebuild a small but warm sense of community in the Northern city.

Even Joe and Violet feel free when Felice is with them, for example by dancing in their apartment and asking her to join them. Felice helps Joe and Violet to know the truth about Dorcas's death and they give Felice a sense of security and love. Morrison presents a process of them all helping each other to overcome what they experienced the previous winter. As Felice says goodbye to Joe and Violet after a visit, Joe tells her "Felice. They named you right. Remember that" (J, p. 215). Felice has brought happiness into their life and they give her a sense of having a family who cares for her. Mutually they assist each other and the cross-generational bonding between Felice and Violet plays a vital part. Morrison, here, suggests that when female homosociality functions in a nurturing or supportive way, the heterosexual connection can also be affirmative and mended. Morrison does not exclude Joe from the happy ending of *Jazz* and presents it alongside the flourishing relationship between Felice and Violet; this could indicate a vision of female-focused bonds improving, and not closing off, male-female relationships at the same time.

Dorcas and Felice's lack of love and parental presence in childhood shapes their later feelings and responses. Dorcas finds a brief bond with Joe, who suffers the same lack, and Felice finds an educative, nurturing place with Violet and Joe later on. Though the female friendship between the two girls has hurt Felice, ultimately it also led her to form a new, cross-age female connection, which helps shape her future in positive ways. Although they

are from different generations, the relationship between Violet and Felice works out better than that between Felice and Dorcas. This chapter's focus helps identify Morrison's vision of another kind of female homosociality in *Jazz*, which is that of intergenerational friendship.

To complete the picture, another significant female connection in the novel, the earlier relationship between True Belle and her daughter Rose Dear in the South, requires attention. When Rose Dear was still a small child, as a slave True Belle was forced to move away with her mistress, leaving behind her family.<sup>53</sup> With Vera Louise she had to raise Golden Gray rather than her own children. The legacies of slavery, initiated in this displacement, are significant for other relations in *Jazz*. True Belle's daughter, Rose Dear, who first loses her mother then later her husband, is forced to leave the area and she and her children are dispossessed of their home in 1888. Rose Dear, left with nothing, loses her mind. No longer enslaved, True Belle comes 'to take charge and over. The little girls fell in love right away and things got put back together. Slowly but steadily, for about four years, True Belle got things organized. And then Rose Dear jumped in the well and missed all the fun' (J, p. 99). Here True Belle is figured as a saviour for a shattered family. The image of a powerful grandmother is repeated, echoing Eva Peace in *Sula*. Morrison again presents a grandmother who supports the whole family financially and emotionally.

True Belle was there, chuckling, competent, stitching by fire light, gardening and  
harvesting by day. Pouring mustard tea on the girls' cuts and bruises, and keeping

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<sup>53</sup> Genteel Vera Louise has a child after an illicit liaison with a black man and for this in the antebellum South, is banished from her home and family. At the same time sexual exploitation of black women by their white masters was widespread and there was no means of complaint or legal redress. For more information about the legislation passed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century on this issue refer to: Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984) pp. 38-9.



them at their tasks with spellbinding tales of her Baltimore days and the child she had cared for there. Maybe it was that; knowing her daughters were in good hands, better hands than her own, at last [...]. So [Rose Dear] dropped herself down the well and missed all the fun (J, p. 102).

True Belle substitutes for her own daughter who is not able to care for her daughters any more, coping with the hardships of the turn-of-the-century South. The image of True Belle stitching for the girls is later resonant of Alice Manfred's restorative stitching of Violet's coat. The affection and joy that True Belle shows toward the girls fascinates them, but their mother's suicide overshadows their young conception of motherhood. Indeed, Violet decides to never have children. What she sees in her mother was someone overwhelmed, too weak for such a hostile world. In contrast, True Belle appears a capable, positive female figure yet, just as Eva in *Sula* eventually condemns her granddaughter and has a controlling aspect, True Belle decides for Violet when she must leave home for work: 'the well sucked her sleep, but the notion of leaving frightened her. It was True Belle who forced it' (J, p. 102).

The grandmother also plants a dangerous idealisation of Golden Gray in her young granddaughters' minds. As Andrea O'Reilly writes:

The text suggests that Violet's "fatal attraction" for Golden Gray is responsible for her emotional scarring; the pain of unrequited love damages Violet's developing selfhood. However, not only is Violet's love for him not reciprocated, but in loving him – a white male – Violet locates that which is beautiful and desired outside of

her self. From her grandmother's tales of the pampered and worshipped Golden boy, Violet learns that with whiteness and maleness one is assured love and happiness.<sup>54</sup>

By telling the adoring story of the (apparently) white boy whom she raised, True Belle ruins the girls' imagination of love and beauty and forces them to accept dominant racial stereotypes. True Belle is a grandmother full of care and affection but she has her own shortcomings as the head of an all-female household, shortcomings partly shaped by the hierarchies instituted by the slave system. None of the female connections in the novel work as powerfully as the friendship in later life between Alice and Violet. The benefits of this female homosociality are much clearer than in other female interrelations. The life-changing outcome of their friendship has a pivotal impact on Felice as well through Violet, saving another young promising life.

*Jazz* portrays and draws attention to female connection through different pairs of women. For instance, in the narrative present the reader encounters the friendships between Dorcas and Felice, Violet and Alice, and also Violet and Felice. The mother-daughter relationships between Felice and her mother, and also Dorcas and Alice, are described partly in the present time and partly in the past. In earlier timeframes from before the Great Migration North, examples of mother-daughter bonds and separations can be found in *True Belle* and *Rose Dear*, as well as *Rose Dear* and Violet. When *Rose Dear* commits suicide, the upbringing of Violet becomes the responsibility of True Belle, her grandmother, this pattern

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<sup>54</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, "'In Search of My Mother's Garden, I Found My Own': Mother-Love, Healing, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", *African American Review*, 30 (1996), pp. 367-79, p. 371.

of replacement parenting being replicated in the later upbringings of Felice and Dorcas. As *Jazz* progresses, the stories that lie behind all of these relations are gradually unravelled, meaning that multiple layers of the past come to inform our understanding of them and of Morrison's interest in the failures and promises of female homosociality.

The significance of social background and history for each character's present life is relevant here. Morrison's depiction of female homosociality is often informed by the national, regional, communal, racial, and gendered contexts revealed in her novels. Although the aftermath of slavery and the impact of racial hierarchy in her work has been discussed in many ways by critics, the area of female homosociality in relation to these contexts has been somewhat neglected. In *Jazz* this is seen most clearly as influential for the mother-daughter relationship between True Belle and Rose Dear. As a slave, True Belle had to leave her own family behind in order to care for her mistress and her child, Golden Gray. Born out of wedlock to Vera Louise and one of her slaves, the boy is a mulatto with lemony yellow skin and blonde hair who passes for white. As mentioned, True Belle's disturbing idealization of Golden Gray's appearance and manners is passed on through story telling to her granddaughters. When in the Harlem present Violet thinks about her Southern past and how she met Joe, she remembers the allure of her grandmother's tales:

Who was he [Joe] thinking of when he ran in the dark to meet me in the cane field?  
Somebody golden, like my own Golden boy, who I never saw but who tore up my  
girlhood as surely as if we'd been the best of lovers? [...] I knew him and loved  
him better than anybody except True Belle who is the one made me crazy about  
him in the first place (J, p. 97).

When True Belle comes to help Rose Dear after her eviction, slavery may have passed but racial and economic oppression is still a deadly force. True Belle's response to Rose Dear's mental breakdown and subsequent suicide enables the family's survival; it is supportive and selfless (and also involves leaving her now 'cushiony job' (J, p. 99)). Yet although she is a big aid to the shattered family, her stories of Golden Gray also negatively impress Violet and lead to her future breakdown. Thus the mother-daughter relationships between True Belle, Rose Dear, and Violet are very much shaped by the constraints and ongoing legacies of slavery. Southern slavery takes True Belle away from her children and economic oppression takes Rose Dear away from Violet. True Belle, with good intentions, reconstructs a home for her daughter's family but inadvertently contributes to Violet's devaluation of self and absorption of the white standard of beauty. In the end, Violet has to kill her 'me' who is in love with Golden Gray, and overcome her dissociated city life through friendship to forge a better existence and renew her heterosexual union with Joe.

The mother-daughter relationship between Dorcas and her mother is also shaped by a social backdrop of violent racial division, this time in the early twentieth century. Dorcas's father is killed for his race during a riot and her mother is then burnt to death. She is thus deprived of a proper family. The parents of Felice do not face such extreme oppression, but they do have to leave their home and only child behind to work for inflexible white employers in another city. Felice's experience of family and memory of her mother consequently also suffer because of racial inequality and economic constraints. Both girls have been brought up by figures other than their parents, Alice Manfred in Dorcas's case and her grandmother in Felice's. This shared loss perhaps feeds into their girlhood friendship as well as their loneliness. Dorcas

later sacrifices her female bond with Felice in order to be with Joe and yet that heterosexual connection between orphans fails too.

Morrison gives most positive emphasis to the friendships between Alice and Violet (women the same age) and between Violet and Felice (a cross-generational encounter), both developing in the narrative present. The latter relationship benefits from the outcome of the former one. Violet and Alice, as discussed before, help each other to overcome their fears, isolation, and breakdowns. Before moving to the city, where people remain closed off in apartments, Violet used to belong to a rural Southern community. In the narrator's summary comments on Violet's early years of marriage to Joe, the reader observes a powerful Violet who is very different from the Violet who lives in the city:

She didn't use to be that way. She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician. She liked, and had, to get her way. She had chosen Joe and refused to go back home once she'd seen him taking shape in early light (J, p. 23).

This stronger, purposeful Violet seems to be partially recovered by the end of *Jazz*. Alice Manfred also suffers from the restrictions that her parents placed upon her while growing up under their vigilant eyes, restrictions which were intended to protect her in a world of sexual vulnerability for black women but which also stifled her. A shared female connection empowers both women to come out of their established habits and shelters, and to see the world around them with a different outlook. In the era of the narrative present, such female

friendship can perhaps thrive since external social forces are less violently determining, and both women in maturity have struggled to overturn the damaging values they had internalized earlier. As a result of this connection, Violet improves her life and now acts as a teacher for the next generation. She helps Felice to re-evaluate her family past and relations with Dorcas, and decide upon a more promising self-defined future.

## **Conclusion**

Female homosociality is depicted in various forms in both novels and the formation of this bonding differs from one to another. Morrison portrays the role of female homosociality in women's lives and, as I have tried to uncover in this chapter, the effects of age on this connection. For instance, in *Sula* she compares the friendship between Nel and Sula as young girls and as adults, while in *Jazz* she introduces female protagonists finding closeness in their middle age and a bonding which transcends the age difference between Violet and Felice. In *Sula* there is a narrative break between Part One and Part Two. Each part includes one main section of the two girls' life and bonding: childhood and adulthood. The reader compares their experiences of female homosociality in two crucial phases of life, illustrating the influence of maturation, and with it entry into dominant social orders, on female relationships. Yet in *Jazz*, although there is no narrative break, the narration moves from the present into the past. The narrative starts in the 1920s, but it also moves back to the plantation era and introduces slavery as the main obstacle to close mother-daughter relationships late in the novel. The history of slavery is brought in at an advanced stage in the narrative as part of

Morrison's shaping of a conclusion to her plot between Joe, Violet and Dorcas/Felice and the reaching of climactic knowledge through the gradual uncovering of characters' backstories.

Although Morrison depicts female homosociality as a positive force in many of these examples, she avoids idealizing female friendship as a definitive aid to female self-recognition and expression. Instead, she offers counter representations which undermine the potential holiness of female homosociality and bring it down to a deliberately quotidian level. For instance, True Belle and Eva Peace are both introduced as strong female characters that run their own households and so create the basis for female homosociality, but at the same time they are shown to be fallible and to sometimes fail other women. Eva seems to be a matriarch who wants to decide on the lives of her family, and True Belle ruins Violet's sense of self and beauty by introducing Golden Gray as an ideal to her. Yet both Eva and True Belle are revealed as the victims of a wider system. Eva had to sacrifice a leg to support her family financially and True Belle is taken away from her family to serve her slave mistress.

On the surface, it seems that in both *Sula* and *Jazz* Morrison blames poor mother-daughter relationships for girls and women being unhappy, immature, dependent, or unable to sustain their own family, offering female friendship as a form of compensation. In fact, while Morrison exposes the side effects of dysfunctional parent-child relationships, she always also interweaves the reasons behind this damage into her narratives. For example, when Hannah asks Eva if she has ever loved her children, Eva gets angry and explains to her that, as a single mother in the early twentieth century, ensuring their survival was more important and she has proved her love towards her children not verbally but through her bodily sacrifice. Still, Eva's lack of affection affects Hannah, and she cannot then bestow motherly love on her own daughter, Sula.

In both novels, Morrison foregrounds the desire of women to obtain self-knowledge, self-belief, and independent identities, and female homosociality acts as a means for them to achieve these goals. Nel comes to know the value of her connection to Sula, but only when it is too late. Violet and Alice both overcome traumas in their lives and isolation through their friendship, and in *Felice*, Morrison promises a better future for a girl who is beginning to recognize her me-ness through the female homosociality found with Violet. Age is explored as a significant factor in female bonding in both novels. The friendship between Sula and Nel in their childhood is represented as much more promising than their conflict and division in adulthood after the entry into heterosexual relationships. A similar split is played out for Dorcas and Felice. On the other hand, the friendship between two middle-aged women – Violet and Alice – is much more enabling and the connection between Violet and Felice, which is a cross-generational relationship, is nurturing and caring, thus compensating for a damaged mother-daughter bond.

Although the main issues remain the same, the depictions of female homosociality in *Sula*, one of Morrison's early works, and in *Jazz*, which was written almost twenty years later, do differ. In *Sula* the heterosexual relationship is peripheral to female friendship, including at the novel's end, whereas in *Jazz* Morrison shows how female homosociality can enhance a sense of self, concluding with a damaged male-female union that is restored through this. In the next chapter, I will turn to *Song of Solomon* and *Love*, both of which revolve around a patriarchal figure. Although it initially seems marginal, female homosociality emerges as significant, perhaps especially in *Love*.



## Chapter Two

### Revolving Around Men: Patriarchy and Women's Identity in *Song of Solomon* and *Love*

#### Introduction

While *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* both concentrate on a female character's life story, in *Song of Solomon*, her third novel, Morrison draws a different picture and conceives of her novel as a male *Bildungsroman*. Although the story is about a young man's journey towards gaining identity, Morrison highlights the help and support which he receives from the women in his life. Here, Morrison also emphasises how women are defined in connection to men, and how they rival their peers in order to gain meaning or status through their connections to men. Examining Morrison's fiction through feminist lenses focused on such issues, we find a similar engagement in *Love*, the author's eighth novel. Although the story of *Love* revolves around a dead man, the chapter titles foreground his ongoing connection to the women who surrounded him. In both novels, Morrison deliberately sets a male character in the centre and develops a cast of female characters around him, and in connection to him, to show how in a patriarchal system women are conditioned to gain identity. Morrison published *Song of Solomon* in 1977 and *Love* in 2003. Both novels include a mid-twentieth-century and Civil Rights period setting, meaning that associated social transitions and tensions provide a backdrop to the stories. While *Song of Solomon* follows its protagonist as a child and adult through mid-twentieth-century decades, *Love* has a dual timeframe, with a 1990s present but a narrative that spirals back to earlier history and interactions. Nevertheless, in both novels

the author portrays the class differences between female characters and how they are dependent on patriarchal figures, such as Macon Dead and Bill Coosey, economically.

In this chapter, following on from my previous focus on friendship, I will examine how Morrison portrays the failure of female homosociality when women are competing over and elevating a man. I will start my analysis with the earlier *Song of Solomon*, a male Bildungsroman which has thus far received more critical responses than *Love*. It seems to represent a radical shift in Morrison's focus as a writer whose protagonists are normally women, yet there is still an ongoing critical debate about who the protagonist really is in this novel: Milkman or Pilate. Firstly, I will explore the backgrounds of both Pilate and Ruth, two key female figures in my reading, and then I will turn my focus to neglected narrative episodes showing their female homosociality.

### **Female Collaboration Between Ruth and Pilate in *Song of Solomon***

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison portrays the life of a girl who is ostracised by her society since she is poor, black and ugly. She is raped by her father and goes insane, and her search for an identity remains incomplete. Critics regard Morrison's first novel to be about the plight of this young black girl and her second novel, *Sula*, as about the growing-up of two black girls into adulthood. The titular character Sula, in her complexity, then finds echoes in Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*, through a significant older female figure. The characteristics of Sula as a multifaceted representation of woman, which give rise to disapproval as well as sympathy in readers' minds, can to some extent be traced in Pilate, a central character in Morrison's third novel. In this section, I will start my discussion by

bringing together some important critics who have adopted pertinent angles, especially on all-female units. Then I will develop my own perspective, which investigates depictions of female homosociality within the male Bildungsroman and tries to identify what is distinctive about the approach in this text. The connection between Pilate and Ruth plays a major role in my interpretation.

*Song of Solomon*, as outlined above, comprises a shift from Morrison's former two female-centred works to a novel with a male protagonist. Although the story turns on Milkman's quest for identity, the final redemption is brought about by females who help him in his journey to discover his family history and roots. There is a female-headed family in *Song of Solomon* as well as *Sula*, where three generations of women live under the same roof without a male presence.

Karla F. C. Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos draw attention to Morrison's interest in a whole range of women:

[t]hese are stories of girls' growths into young womanhood and women's growths into a magical wisdom of age. Morrison's girls — Pecola, Claudia and Frieda (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970) — battle physical and spiritual abandonment, rape/incest and insanity either first hand or by learning that such things happen and discovering the responses of the Black women in the community to such events. Her young women — Sula and Nel (*Sula*, 1973), Jadine (*Tar Baby*, 1981) and Hagar (*Song of Solomon*, 1977) — discover that their femaleness entitles them to a certain position

in the community but that with this entitlement, individual rights are often abrogated as their membership in this community is refined.<sup>55</sup>

As observed above, Morrison portrays women in different stages of life and addresses how their attitudes, place in the community and, on the other hand, their problems change through different phases. She not only locates them in various contexts but also offers portraits of women of different social levels. In their childhood, black girls like Pecola and Claudia encounter abuse and madness themselves or they watch their friends going through such experiences. They sometimes suffer from damaged family and difficult social relations. Young women such as Sula or Hagar have their own struggles, such as defining their black femininity in a local community and a wider society with limiting gender definitions, and negotiating the dominant (white) ideal of beauty.

Considering the representation of senior females in Morrison's works, Holloway and Demetrakopoulos further comment:

Older women are magical because of their will to survive, because of their embodiment of the mythology and wisdom of Africa, and because Morrison invests them with physical qualities larger than life that structure the politics of their survival, and in consequence the survival of the Black community (178).

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<sup>55</sup> Stephanie Demetrakopoulos and Karla F. C. Holloway, 'Remembering Our Foremothers: Older Black Women, Politics of Age, Politics of Survival as Embodied in the Novels of Toni Morrison', in *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 177-96, pp. 177-78.

These critics offer an entirely positive reading of the figures of older women. Eva in *Sula* and Pilate in *Song of Solomon* both play the role of supportive grandmothers who run households full of females single-handed. They are the survivors who financially and spiritually support their black families and either never have long-term relationships with men or after marriage have been left to manage alone. Despite Holloway and Demetrakopoulos's mention of ancestral 'wisdom' however, they are not entirely positive figures. Both are sometimes stubborn, bossy, and they want to rule over the lives of those whom they protect. As we will see in the case of Pilate later, older women also do not always affirm 'prime order'.

In her illuminating book, *Becoming and Bonding*, Katherine B. Payant explores Morrison's complex representation of single-parent families. She observes

Pilate's daughter and granddaughter obviously have been hurt by being raised with no significant males in their lives. Reba knows little about men and is weak and floating, still dependent on her mother in her fifties. Though Morrison suggests Reba may be a little slow-witted, she also tells us that having no father was not good for Reba.<sup>56</sup>

This view complicates a positive picture of all female units. However, what Payant says here seems more applicable to a family that is single-sex by choice and not a situation imposed on the black women concerned. In most of Morrison's works, men abandon their families and black women are left to feed and protect their children. The mainstream normative family comprises of both parents, but when one of them leaves the household the other one has little

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<sup>56</sup> Katherine B. Payant, *Becoming and Bonding: Contemporary Feminism and Popular Fiction by American Women Writers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 185.

choice but to continue alone. Payant further distinguishes Morrison from a feminist position advocating separatism:

So the beguiling picture of Pilate with her daughter and granddaughter is only one side of the human equation; the other is missing, which leads to profound unhappiness for this matriarchal family. Such a viewpoint is, of course, very different from that of radical white feminists who urge separation from men. In black culture, says Morrison, men are the ancestors, too, and we separate from them at our peril (186).

What Payant tries to convey here is the difference between Toni Morrison's standpoint, surely rooted in economic and social patterns in black communities, and white radical feminists' ideas of exclusive homosociality. She asserts that Morrison not only does not advocate female-headed families, but also shows how dysfunctional these families could be. This seems not a full reflection of what Morrison actually presents in her works. Although Morrison acknowledges that the lack of a guiding male figure in Hagar's life is part of the reason for her weakness, at the same time the author repeatedly shows families that have been left by black fathers and devoted black mothers who try hard to support not only their children but also sometimes their grandchildren in tough circumstances. Undoubtedly we see daughters who have lacked affection or independence or a male parental figure in these homes, yet Morrison also portrays the underlying reasons, the mothers' struggles and sometimes compensatory bonds.

Susan Willis considers Pilate's home, an all-female one, as a utopia, while on the other hand Ruth's is dystopic:

In *Song of Solomon* the three-woman household finds its utopian realization in Pilate's house, and its dystopian cancellation in the house Ruth shares with Macon Dead. Aside from the fact that both houses are comprised of women and defined upon different economic models (accumulation versus non-accumulation), Ruth's house fails to bring the feminist principle into being. It represents, instead, male domination in the form of Macon's ruthless authority and his son's petulant egotism. In contrast, Pilate's household, again composed of three heterosexual women [...] negates male domination simply because, while the women may have relationships with men, men do not live in or define the space and economy of the household.<sup>57</sup>

Willis's argument can be seen as persuasive in the sense that if the reader wants to compare the two households, Pilate's home is better than Ruth's since in Pilate's there is close female bonding, where in Ruth's such connection is marginal. Yet delving into the depth of the utopian household that Willis considers, one cannot trace any ideal form of female relationship. For example, Pilate whips Hagar for the sake of a man and a more detailed look at these dynamics can only undermine any idealized vision of her household.

In *Song of Solomon* female characters are highlighted and prominent as and when they play an important role in the male protagonist's life and quest for identity. In *Love* women are initially defined through their connection to a central patriarch. Both novels feature women sharing a household without men. In *Song of Solomon* as well as *Love*, female family members collaborate to help save a man's life and men mostly do not heed the

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Willis, 'Black Women Writers: Taking a Critical Perspective', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 211-37, p. 235.

existence and the feelings of these women at all. The two most significant female characters to be looked at next are Ruth, Milkman's mother, and Pilate, his aunt. The characterization of these two women, their backgrounds and their shared relationship, will be considered.

Pilate was born with no navel; her mother died before giving birth to her and she tried to come out of her mother's womb without any external help, as symbolized by the lack of a cord. This makes her character mysterious if not supernatural to the reader as well as to the other characters. Because of this physical difference, she is deprived of living a normal life:

It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied to her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion.<sup>58</sup>

When she is not permitted marriage or friendship bonds, not allowed to follow the communal religion, she starts at zero and makes her own life by the standards that she thinks are right. Orphaned by racial violence at a young age, she leads a vagrant existence and only settles down when she finds that Hagar, her less independent granddaughter, needs some relatives to feel connected.

Pilate is depicted as a helper and a protector to all her female relatives. It is worth mentioning that her very name was chosen from the Bible for its protective shape by her illiterate father. She runs a bootlegging business to support Reba and Hagar financially, she threatens Reba's lover with death when she finds out that he has beaten her daughter, and, as I

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<sup>58</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977) (London: Picador, 1989), p. 147.



am going on to examine, she helps Ruth in gaining sexual intimacy and later in keeping the resultant baby alive in her womb. In her very first encounter with Ruth, Pilate perceives her problem. She gives her sister-in-law some herbal treatments to add to Macon's food; her prescription works and Ruth succeeds in conceiving a baby. Even after getting pregnant, when Macon forces her to try to abort her child, Ruth seeks help from Pilate. Pilate helps her with maternal affection and protects her against Macon.

The homosocial bond between Pilate and Ruth at this stage seems straightforward and supportive, but the goal of this sharing is important to consider as well. Indeed, Pilate tries her best to protect the baby that will eventually be the boy heir of the Dead family. When Pilate even sacrifices her own life to save Milkman's later on, the picture of women's solidarity is further complicated. Helping Ruth with a much sought-after and spoiled son and then giving her life to protect the same male member of the family, Pilate's actions can be seen to reinforce the importance of man in a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, Ruth is the only daughter of a respectable, widowed black doctor and has been pampered by her father while growing up. She suffers within an oppressive marriage to the upwardly mobile, violent Macon Dead and craves affection. With the help of Pilate, Ruth gets pregnant and within her new maternal role enjoys breast-feeding her son Milkman beyond the usual age. When Ruth is deprived of this little joy, she starts making furtive trips to her father's grave and feels yet more isolated and possessive.

On Ruth feeding her son beyond the usual age, Wilfred D. Samuels writes

There is little doubt that Ruth's indulgences provide her with the physical contact her husband denies her, but her motives are not merely the fulfilment of sexual needs. This act may even represent efforts to compensate for the aborted

relationship Ruth experienced from her mother's death, which would have fractured the nurturing process.<sup>59</sup>

Samuels considers Ruth's prolonged nurturing of her son as an act of compensating for the motherly love and affection of which she was deprived. His reading can help illuminate the relationship between Ruth and Milkman, but Samuels's reasoning is not applicable in a broader scope. Considering the fact that Ruth has three children, and she had two daughters years before Milkman's birth, the intense centring of love and intimacy on the son and not Lena and Corinthians is noteworthy. If Ruth is compensating for the motherly affection which she has not received, why does she only focus on Milkman and not her daughters? I suggest that the situation reveals that even Ruth as a mother succumbs to patriarchal values and treats her children differently. All her efforts go into Milkman, a boy, whom she considers worthy.

There are two major encounters between Ruth and Pilate in the narrative of *Song of Solomon* that are especially significant to my argument in this chapter. It is worth mentioning that both meetings are narrated in one chapter and one immediately after the other, though the latter one happens thirty years after the former. In both her journeys to Pilate's house, Ruth intends to seek help from Pilate in order to save her son's life. As we will also see in *Love*, homosociality is sometimes introduced in this novel not for the sake of women's welfare and growth, but for the life of a man who is considered more worthy.

When Ruth succeeds in getting pregnant without his permission, Macon becomes furious and forces her to try to abort the child. His last attempt, by punching Ruth's stomach, prompts Ruth to run to get help from Pilate for a second time, this time in fear. Although she

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<sup>59</sup> Wilfred D. Samuels, 'Liminality and The Search for Self in *Song of Solomon*', in *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), pp. 5-28, p. 9.

does not know the exact address, she finds her way to Pilate's humble home on the wrong side of town; as the narrator explains, 'She ran to Southside looking for Pilate. She had never walked through that part of town' (SS, p. 131). This comment shows how secluded Ruth is from the society in which Pilate lives. They dwell in totally different neighbourhoods in very different class circumstances. Yet the binding point which brings these two women together is Milkman.

When Ruth gets there we learn:

Pilate comforted Ruth, gave her a peach [...]. She listened to what Ruth said and sent Reba to the store for a box of Argo cornstarch. She sprinkled a little of it into her hand and offered it to Ruth, who obediently took a lump and put it in her mouth. As soon as she tasted it, felt its crunchiness, she asked for more (SS, pp. 131-32).

The affection and the attention that Pilate shows to Ruth are what she is deprived of in her life. By comforting her, listening to her, in a maternal way sprinkling some cornstarch on her own hand (and not Ruth's, treating her like a child), and telling her how to take care of herself, Pilate plays the role of a mother whom Ruth has never seen. Later on, Pilate and Reba wrap Ruth in a 'homemade-on-the-spot girdle' (SS, p. 132) and tell her to keep it on till the fourth month. Commonly, it is mothers who take care of their pregnant daughters and share their experiences and the ways of taking care of their babies, but here, although Pilate is not much older than Ruth, she becomes the voice of experience and a healer for her. Perhaps the most significant help is Pilate's plan to stop Macon from further abusing Ruth, and finally she succeeds, 'for he left Ruth alone after that' (SS, p. 132).

The second time that Ruth goes to Southside is roughly thirty years after her first visit, and this time it is about Milkman as well. When Ruth reaches Pilate's house, she compares the place to the one she has seen before: 'this house had been a haven then, and in spite of the cold anger she felt now, it still looked like an inn, a safe harbour' (SS, p. 135). Later, she reflects '[s]he needed Pilate's calm view, her honesty and equilibrium. Then she would know what to do' (SS, p. 135). Ruth's feeling towards Pilate's house as a 'safe harbour' or an 'inn', and her urgent need to see the 'calm view' of Pilate, show the great influence and potential of the female bonding between Ruth and Pilate, something which they do not seem to consciously register.

The second time that Ruth meets Pilate is a little different from her first visit, since this time there is another female character in between, Hagar, who has been in a sexual relationship with Milkman. When Ruth enters Pilate's house, she becomes angry on seeing Hagar for she has threatened violence after being coldly rejected by Milkman. Ruth shows rage and even hatred toward Hagar since she thinks that Hagar wants to kill her only joy in life, her son. On the other hand, Hagar contemplates killing Ruth: 'Maybe you, she thought. Maybe it's you I should be killing. Maybe then he will come to me' (SS, p. 137). In her disturbed mind, Pilate's granddaughter Hagar regards Ruth as her enemy, thinking that Ruth is able to live with and enjoy time with Milkman while she cannot. This misguided rivalry between Hagar and Ruth over a man destroys what could have been a positive female homosocial bond between the women of the family. Pilate reproaches them both, and tells them that the one for whom they are fighting pays no attention to either since he is a man: 'he wouldn't give a pile of swan shit for either of you' (SS, p. 137). Through this scene Morrison

unravels a distorted set of values influenced by patriarchy and the prioritisation of female-male ties.

Ruth, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar could develop extended female bonds but are all in some way alone as they give preference to the men over the women in their lives. Both Pilate, a seemingly independent figure, and Ruth, a very dependent one, continue to live in the shadow of their relations to their fathers (Pilate's father's ghost communes with her still, while Ruth lies on her father's grave). Ruth also does everything to protect her son's life, believing hers will be joyless and meaningless without him, while neglecting the formation of closeness with her daughters. Reba finds pleasure in men's company but never keeps one in her life, and finally Hagar goes mad when Milkman leaves her. All these women could help each other to flourish, but instead their main concern is the life and welfare of an arrogant, ungrateful man. Here, Morrison shows the destruction of those women who depend, and entirely focus their existence and potential happiness, on a man. Meanwhile neither Macon Dead — a patriarchal father and husband — nor Milkman appreciate or even pay any attention to the women who sacrifice their lives for their well-being. As I will later explore, a similar pattern is revealed by Morrison in *Love* where again we find a portrayal of the damaging side effects of women depending for their whole identity on a man.

Although Pilate and Ruth are different in many aspects, they share some similarities which connect them. As the narrator recounts,

They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill travelled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. But

those were the meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son, and both had close and supportive post-humous communication with their fathers (*SS*, p. 139).

This extract is a pivotal description of Pilate and Ruth, their commonalities and differences. Pilate is associated with the South, the site of home for most African Americans. Ruth comes from a Northern mixed black family, and her father was obsessed about his child's light skin colour. Ruth is middle-class, well-behaved, and socially accepted, whereas Pilate is disreputable and lives apart, although both women are living in isolation in some sense. Ruth is well-educated, but she has not been to other parts of the country to achieve new experiences and learn about other people, while Pilate knows only her geography book yet was living a wandering life before coming to the city. As outlined earlier, for some critics she is the voice of wisdom and knowledge in the novel. Ruth has always been pampered in terms of material luxuries and is totally dependent on such economic privilege, whereas money is the least important thing in Pilate's life. For instance, Andrea O'Reilly explores the differences between Ruth and Pilate and says:

Pilate [...] is a woman who fully and completely embraces the ancestral memory, ancient properties, and funk of the motherline while Ruth, disconnected from her motherline and schooled as a daddy's girl in the ways of assimilation, has disavowed the traditions of her forebears. Their contrasting life values give rise to and are represented in opposing motherhood practices and philosophies (80).

According to this critic, the difference between Pilate's and Ruth's motherhood is

dependent on their connection to their past. She believes that since Pilate is still mindful of being a bearer of her ancestral culture, she seems to be more successful in her parenting. However, interestingly, the narrator suggests these differences are meaningless when one looks at their deeper similarities. Primarily they are both concerned about 'Macon Dead's son' and his life. As this phrasing illustrates, in a patriarchal society, where the whole family is a part of the father's property, Milkman is defined through his relation to his father while the mother, Ruth, who labours to give birth to the children and raise them, is ignored. Morrison highlights this idea here to reinforce how both women succumb to patriarchal values in their focus on Milkman.

The other important similarity between Pilate and Ruth is the ongoing role of their fathers in their lives. Pilate believes that her dead father is still present and comes to her aid whenever she needs his guidance. Ruth is also soothed by going to her father's grave and talking to him. As she tells Milkman about her upbringing and father,

I'm small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dress and my white silk stockings. But I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him. I was small, but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died. Lots of people were *interested* in whether I lived or died, but he cared. He was not a good man, Macon. Certainly he was an arrogant man, and often a foolish and destructive one. But he cared whether and he cared how I lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did. And for that I would do anything (SS, p. 124).

In this passage, Ruth shows her ignorance about what her father really did to her; however, she is unwittingly revealing the truth about him here. Her father treated her like a pampered doll that is incapable of being out in society or acting independently. She is 'pressed small' not because of the big house in which she lives, but by her father who has brought her up in this cloistered, isolating way. She has always imagined him as big and herself as a little insignificant thing.

The sense of herself as small articulated here also relates to her being kept immature and lacking independence. She is her father's daughter and his middle-class position makes even the priest respect her and single her out. Her father decided her marriage for her and, in some respects, exchanged her for the future security of Macon's money. The idealized big man who supposedly cared for Ruth does not seem to be very caring to the readers. Ruth believes that he was loving and kind, but he is nonetheless established as a patriarchal presence. As the word 'interested' is italicized in this extract, it suggests that people from the community were drawn to the luxurious life that she had, rather than being sympathetic to her feelings and miseries.

Considering Ruth and Pilate as binary opposites, Mary Aswell Doll writes:

Her purpose, I suggest, is to show for women, as has been shown for men, that energy and creativity can be activated when female opposites come together. The double in literature can be seen as a structure of consciousness. It not only broadens the notion of the singular ego-self, it also challenges the inertia of dualities. By seeing opposites together, especially female opposites, Morrison



endows her female characters with the same kind of dynamic potential that male characters have traditionally enjoyed.<sup>60</sup>

As Doll writes, Pilate and Ruth, who are opposite female characters, can help each other to grow, can bring about new experiences and understanding. Ruth is submissive and Pilate transgresses, so these two might identify what they lack in each other and through female homosociality enjoy what men benefit from, a bonding which enables them to achieve fulfillment and learning. A closer connection between Ruth and Pilate forms when Pilate helps Ruth to have physical contact with her husband once more. While Ruth was yearning for intimacy and attention, Pilate had another intention in this plan, seeking a male descendant of the Dead family. Although the character of Pilate, who lives a care-free existence, arouses admiration, in some respects, when she becomes a voice of patriarchy, she disappoints the reader. Pilate lives by her father's guidelines and is not completely independent, as it seems in the beginning of the novel. Also significant is that she helps Ruth to have a baby boy to ensure the survival of their family name and line. She is so much concerned with Milkman's life that she beats her love-broken granddaughter, Hagar, whenever she tries to attack him. Pilate appears as a saviour for Reba, her daughter, when a stranger hits her, but when it comes to Hagar being a threat to Milkman, she has no mercy upon her. She does not support Hagar, who is a victim of male cruelty, and whips her instead to protect Milkman. Even when Hagar dies after being abandoned by Milkman, Pilate supports him up to the point that she sacrifices her own life to keep him alive. The female

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<sup>60</sup> Mary Aswell Doll, *Like Letters in Running Water: A Mythopoetics of Curriculum* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), p. 184.

homosociality between Pilate and Ruth is based on caring for Milkman. They both help in bringing him into this world, as the male heir of the Dead family, and both help each other in supporting him through life. They both acknowledge his existence as being more precious than their own, as both sacrifice their lives for him. In a patriarchal system, a male heir is more valued since he is assumed to keep the legacy of the family going. Here, Pilate and Ruth, instead of helping each other through different stages of life, focus their time and energy on someone else whom they consider more worthy. Morrison thus shows how patriarchal values can degrade female bonding and deflect women from achieving their own development. Likewise, in *Love*, Heed and Christine fight over being the heir to Bill Cosey's legacy and fortune instead of making their own lives valuable and worth living.

At the beginning of the novel, Hagar appears to be an empowered girl, telling Milkman that she is not afraid of anyone and that she does not obey Pilate if she wishes not to. Yet little by little, she changes into and is revealed as an insecure, fragile young woman, who only seeks Milkman's attention and love. Since her childhood, Hagar has been pampered by Pilate and Reba, who try to satisfy her increasingly vain and shallow desires. She has never known her father and it seems has not received a proper communal education that might have guided her about men and self-worth. Thus Hagar feels totally devastated when Milkman stops loving her and pays no attention to her. As the narrator comments, '[s]he needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends' (*SS*, p. 307). She has her mother and grandmother, but she lacks being surrounded by a circle of women who can guide a girl through new passages and challenges, especially in heterosexual relationships. Once Milkman rejects her, she yearns to have the only thing of which she is deprived. When she

fails to own Milkman, she plans to kill him. After her failure, Guitar — Milkman's friend — tries to advise her on knowing her self-value: 'you're turning over your whole life to him [...] if it means so little to you that you can just give it away, hand it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can't value you more than you value yourself' (SS, p. 306). Pilate and Reba sacrifice everything they have to make Hagar happy again after Milkman leaves her, but it does not work. Hagar dies a few days after Milkman leaves; her death portrays the failure of female homosociality in the loving yet isolated household. She therefore becomes one of the several female characters of the novel whose lives are dependent on Milkman's existence and choice.

The only person who gets angry at this situation regarding Milkman is Magdalene (called Lena), his sister: "Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you" (SS, p. 215). Because of this insight and outburst, it is Lena who helps Milkman to commence his journey of self-discovery. Milkman is at the centre and all the female characters are living their lives to protect him, love him, and help him to have a smooth path. Morrison, by creating Milkman's character, tries to show the significance of patriarchal values in women's lives. Women are brought up in this way, and they have accepted as the norm that they are insignificant and achieve meaning through their relation to a man.

In *Song of Solomon*, we find a portrait of careless men and the dependent female characters that yearn for male attention or, in Pilate's case, simply value the progress of Milkman. Milkman is protected by Ruth and Pilate when he is in Ruth's womb, it is Lena who ignites the search for identity in him, and it is Circe and Susan Byrd who finally help

him in completing his quest, yet he is largely ungrateful and significantly, in enabling the man, the women fail to focus on themselves. Morrison creates two households of female characters in this novel, but in one of them, Ruth's home, there is no significant attention paid to the mother-daughter relationship, and in Pilate's house Hagar is beaten every time she threatens Milkman's life. While the potential of female homosociality is briefly indicated, women's isolation is highlighted to a greater extent. Ruth, Pilate, Hagar, Circe, Susan Byrd, Sweet, First Corinthians and Lena all live in their own isolated worlds, and their existence only gains a meaning whenever it is related to Milkman's life and quest. Morrison through her narrative reveals a patriarchal society where women are kept silent and secluded and only find purpose or definition whenever they are related to a man. I will next turn to *Love*, in which Morrison unpacks the same idea but ultimately develops it in a different direction.

### **Female Homosociality in *Love*: Hatred and Hostility Amongst Women Under the Same Roof**

Pretty. So so pretty.

Love. I really do.

Ush-hidagay. Ush-hidagay. [...] The main ingredient offered by night is escape from watching and watchers. Like stars free to make their own history and not care about another one; or like diamonds unburdened, released into handsome rock.<sup>61</sup>

This is the last conversation between two old friends who have not lived their lives in the way they might have. The poetic language, replete with natural imagery, invites the reader to

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<sup>61</sup> Toni Morrison, *Love* (2003) (Vintage: London, 2004), p. 194.

ponder on the true love between Heed and Christine. The night stands for a time when the lovers are steeped in love, far from the vigilant eyes of watchers or in fact rebukers. That is the time when the two little girls once could make their own history, regardless of interfering forces such as patriarchy, class, and sex discrimination. The story of *Love* is the story of two girls whose friendship was giving them all they needed and could have led them to a better life, when instead a male power enters and darkens their innocent world. Different kinds of male-female relationships are looked at in the novel, but eventually female homosociality is praised above all kinds of bonding. In the story of *Love*, all the female characters compete to obtain a man's (Bill Cosey's) love and attention, and in this way they deprive themselves of a better alternative relationship: female bonding. Even the two old friends do not regain their tender and helpful female connection again until it is too late. The never-achieved female homosociality amongst adult women, and the late realization of the value of female bonding, will form the basis of the main discussion of this chapter. As we have seen, *Song of Solomon* echoes similar patterns, as women care more about the male figures in their families than their own ties and female homosociality is fleeting.

In her review of *Love*, Deborah E. McDowell compares Toni Morrison's novels by tracing different kinds of love in each. She comments that

one thinks of the possessive/protective love that compels Sethe to kill her baby girl, Beloved, in an effort to spare her the certain social death of slavery; the obsessive love that leads Joe Trace, the older man, to fatally shoot Dorcas, his younger lover (*Jazz*); the God-like love that compels Eva to burn her drug-addicted son alive, or the self-sacrificing love that drives her to hurl her crippled body from

a top-floor window in a futile effort to save her daughter engulfed in flames  
(*Sula*).<sup>62</sup>

Further, she considers that the epilogue on love in *The Bluest Eye* foreshadows *Love*, Morrison's eighth novel. She supposes that Morrison's first novel's penultimate paragraph could serve as an epigraph to *Love*:

Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly [...] the lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. As the heart's desire of *Love*, Bill Cosey is literally frozen in the glare of his lovers' inward eyes — Heed's, Christine's, Junior's, Vida's, L's, and May's — becoming whatever each needs him to be (p.9).

She correctly elaborates on Morrison's broad reflection on love and observes that the personality of the people who loved Bill Cosey is revealed through their love relationship with him, and thus their description of Bill Cosey may not be considered as an accurate or full representation of him.

Quite contrary to the title, not only does the reader encounter a novel which does not feature genuine love but also a story full of grudges and hatred. The story of *Love* revolves around the character of a hotel owner whose resort 'was the best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast' (*L*, p. 6). Bill Cosey, who has died twenty-five years

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<sup>62</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, 'Review: Philosophy of the Heart', *The Women's Review of Books*, 21/3 (2003), pp. 8-9, p. 8.

before the beginning of the novel, is seemingly a living ghost whose presence is felt and traced more than that of living characters. As McDowell notes, Bill Cosey is described through the eyes of different characters. To Heed, his child bride and his granddaughter's once best friend, Christine, his granddaughter, Vida, his former receptionist, L, one of the narrators and his former chef, and May, his daughter-in-law, he is a 'Friend', 'Stranger', 'Benefactor', 'Lover', 'Husband', 'Guardian', and 'Father', as the title of each chapter indicates. The story resembles *Song of Solomon*, which is centred on Milkman Dead, but the female characters around Bill are even more highlighted through their connections to him.<sup>63</sup>

The novel commences with a prologue by L, whose name remains a secret, like her presence throughout. Ultimately, at the ending it is revealed that she is dead and it is her phantom which dwells in the memories of Cosey's resort and its inhabitants. In the words of Anissa Janine Wardi, 'just as the word "love" is almost never uttered in this novel, L's full name is withheld, as is her voice in the community.'<sup>64</sup> L is portrayed as a wise woman who criticizes the new generation's lack of communication and their failure to establish a relationship between mind and words: "Nowadays silence is looked on as odd and most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little. Now tongues work all by themselves with no help from the mind" (L, p. 3). L is a Black woman who is unnamed but claims her identity and existence by feeling free to express her words and thoughts. Most of the events are signposted in her monologues and the reader thus finds her way out of this

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<sup>63</sup> Bill Cosey wrote his will on a menu from 1958 and the narrative begins almost twenty-five years after his death. The time span between his death and the narrative present of the novel holds historical significance. The period is occupied by the US Civil Rights Movement, when campaigners fought for legal and economic racial equality, and the parallel struggle for sexual equality from the 1960s onwards. This backdrop gives an insight into May's paranoia about rioters and also explains some of the insecurity that leads to most of the fights between the women in Cosey's household; they are each trying to find economic security in a world which has left them dependent as well as disadvantaged in terms of race and gender.

<sup>64</sup> Anissa Janine Wardi, 'A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of *Love*', *MELUS*, 30/3 (2005), 201-218, p. 206.

labyrinth of scattered narration. For instance, by telling of the girls who come to the café where she works — “Girls like the place a lot. Over iced tea with a clove in it, they join their friends to repeat what he said, describe what he did, and guess what he meant by any of it” (*L*, p. 65) — she tries to indicate and foreshadow the quarrel of women over Bill Cosey and his love. As *L* indicates, the prior obsessions of typical girls and women are men and their possession. Paying too much attention to men and their love engenders a gap in their own relationships and sometimes generates hostility, as in the relation of Heed and Christine. The same kind of hostility is caused by patriarchy in the relationship between Ruth and Hagar, or even Hagar and Pilate, when the obsession on their mind is their love toward Milkman.

The story of *Love*, against the suggestion of the title, is steeped in violence and disfigured characters. Junior, the girl who ‘moved in there a while ago with a skirt short as underpants and no underpants at all’ (*L*, p. 10), has swollen toes which are a reminder of the savage act of her uncles, who ran over her while chasing her by car. The aged hands of Heed turn to a shape like fins when she is arguing with *L*, and May, Christine’s mother, who bears a lifelong grudge against Heed, even on her deathbed, enjoys watching her disfigured hands: ‘May’s war did not end when Cosey died. She spent her last year watching in ecstasy as Heed’s grasping hands turned slowly into wings’ (*L*, p. 99). Bill Cosey’s secret sporting woman, Celestial, also has a scarred face. Heed’s setting fire to Christine’s bed, Christine’s vandalizing of her lover’s car (‘Killing a Cadillac was never easy, but doing it in bright daylight in the frenzy of another woman’s cologne was an accomplishment that deserved serious witnessing by the person for whom it was meant’ (*L*, p. 65)), Romen’s participation in a gang rape of a teenager, and the tragic and bloody ending of the novel all indicate anything but love.



These horrible scenes and grotesque characters are not the common elements of the romantic story the reader might expect from looking at Morrison's title. Imperfect bodies and shocking violent acts — mostly the signs of damage inflicted by a patriarchal order — make the whole story grittier in comparison with typical romantic novels, which are often close to fairy tales. Yet the portrait of nurturing and nursing women emphasises a kind of female homosociality in this novel. L plays the role of the saviour for almost every female character and Heed tends to her old enemy, May, despite having trouble using her own hands. Christine finally nurses Heed, later incapable of doing household chores, and Junior is rescued by her mother when she is chased by her uncles. However, often these scenes of caring between women are actually filled with hatred and malice. The only common desire which draws all the women together is the love of Bill Cosey. Morrison sets up her story in this way to emphasise the fragility of women who invest their status upon a man. Many even compete with their peers instead of bonding with them in order to confirm their own existence.

Bill Cosey, though dead, is everywhere and anywhere. As Anissa Janine Wardi mentions in her article, 'death has done very little to stop the Cosey women from having intimate relations with this powerful patriarch. He over-shadows their lives, their home, and their relationship with one another' (p.206). Even a newcomer like Junior, who has never seen Cosey in person, establishes a relationship with the dead man's apparition.

She has never seen her own father and never met a decent man, thus Bill Cosey quickly stands both as a father and a lover figure for her. While watching his portrait over Heed's bed she thinks

This was the right place and there he was, letting her know in every way it had been waiting for her all along. As soon as she saw the stranger's portrait she knew she was home. She had dreamed him the first night, had ridden his shoulders through an orchard of green Granny apples heavy and thick on the boughs (*L*, p. 50).

Just as he does for Junior, Bill Cosey stands as a guardian figure for all the women in the novel. They almost all merge into one unit that yearns for Bill's attention and care. These women have one thing in common and that is their respect and love toward the mysterious Bill Cosey.

### **Bill Cosey the Patriarch**

All the female characters in *Love* are defined and take an identity in relation to Bill Cosey: for instance, Heed is his young second wife, Christine his granddaughter, May his daughter-in-law, L his cook, and Vida his secretary. Each chapter is entitled by one of the roles of his multi-faceted character, as each woman figures out her relationship with him. While getting acquainted with Bill's character, the reader may regard him as the central figure or the protagonist of the novel. Yet quite astonishingly, we learn he died many years before the commencement of the novel, though his apparition still pervades the whole text. To decipher Bill Cosey's character, one should see him through the eyes of each woman. Each of them gives a bit of information about his charismatic character and most of them try to emphasise

his goodness and generosity and ignore his wickedness and brutality. In spite of being aware of the dark side of his personality, the female characters deliberately eschew mentioning any hint of those aspects which might destroy his idealized image as a charming, supportive male figure. Likewise, in *Song of Solomon*, as we have seen, Ruth is defined through her relationship to her father and her son. Pilate, although a powerful figure, makes important decisions based on the teachings she assumes she receives from her father. Hagar feels empty when Milkman does not pay attention to her love and Reba cannot resist men's will.

In chapter one, *Love* begins with the entrance of a girl from the street who answers Heed's advertisement to find an assistant. Junior, who has recently left a correctional institute, is accepted as Heed's personal assistant but does not yet know what is awaiting her in the mysterious house. She swiftly establishes a love relationship with the dead man's ghost and feels him everywhere. On the first night of her arrival, she decides that the man is the manifestation of a protector of whom she has dreamt throughout her life. In the following chapters, the reader comes to know that Junior has never seen her father and that the brutal behaviour of her uncles, who crush her feet by running over her, and the abusive actions of the correctional manager made her feel the lack of a male guardian figure in her life. She has an epiphany that Bill Cosey is the protector for whom she has always yearned,

as in the early days at Correctional when the nights were so terrifying; when upright snakes on tiny feet lay in wait [...] there was someone beneath the branches standing apart from the snakes, and although she could not see who it was, his being implies rescue [...]. But here, now, deep in sleep, her search seemed to have ended (*L*, pp. 29-30).

She gets a feeling that all these years Bill Cosey has been the missing man in her life, standing for protection and rescue. Junior's love toward Bill Cosey as a patriarch is perplexing in nature. Junior, who has recently finished time in the penal system because she refused to yield to an official's sexual desire, is entrapped in the love of a patriarch who during his life ignored the women closest to him. Love, of which Junior has been always deprived, is potentially on offer from Heed and Christine who, being aware of the fact that she is unsuitable and transgressive, still give her shelter and food. It is true that Heed and Christine use Junior as a means to achieve their goals in fighting each other, but they also adopt a helpless street girl and give her everything she has never had. Junior betrays them at the end of the novel by leaving them helpless, injured, and alone in a deserted place. She never comes to know that the real love which she was always looking for might have been granted to her by these two women. Female homosociality gives Junior more practical love and care in reality than what she expects from an illusory dead patriarch's presence.

Junior keeps her love relationship with the ghost of Bill until the end of the novel, and she feels relief and security in his assumed company. In the chapter named 'Lover', which is about the relationship between Bill Cosey and Heed, once more the reader sees Junior's love relationship in the margin as well. She searches through Bill's personal stuff to find something near to him:

She stroked ties and shirts in the closet; smelled his shoes; rubbed her cheek on the sleeves of his seersucker jacket. Then, finding a stack of undershorts, she took off the red suit, stepped into the shorts, and lay on the sofa. His happiness was unmistakable. So was his relief at having her there, handling his things and enjoying herself in front of him (*L*, p. 119).

The detailed, odd erotic scene is not about a young couple's passionate love, but strikingly the ecstasy of a young girl imagining an old man as her lover. Bill Cosey plays the role of a caring lover, a kind father, and a vigilant guardian for Junior. He is what Junior wants him to be in the same way that he is for other female characters in the novel.

Junior feels secure with the imagined existence of a dead man whom she has never seen. Even after being told that Bill Cosey had committed the obscene act of marrying an eleven-year-old girl, she ignores his wickedness, just like most of the other female characters in the novel. Her aspirations for a protector seem to relate back to the lack of a protective father-figure or another guardian in her life. Her mother ignores her and her uncles chase her as one hunts prey. The correctional manager sexually abuses her and when she fights back, the witnesses are against her. That is why she feels the need for a powerful male protector in her life, since she is not always able to stand against men and win by herself. She lacks the power and self-reliance, yet when depending on an imaginary dead man, she feels jubilant, confident and powerful. She assumes that the ghost is always accompanying her and approves of her transgressive love-making with Romen, but she eventually loses his company when she enters Heed's plan in writing a new will.

Junior establishes a relationship with the dead man's presence since she assumes he is her saviour. She is a fragile character, who has been previously deprived of anyone who really cares for her and of female homosociality as well. She is the only one who tells the reader about the dead man's kind ghost and the existence of his appreciative apparition: 'sometimes he sat at the foot of her bed happy to watch her sleep, and when she woke he winked before he smiled and stepped away [...] and if she was still enough, he might

whisper: “nice hair,” “take it,” “Good girl,” “Sweet tits,” “why not?” More understanding than any G.I. Joe’ (*L*, p. 116). Bill Cosey’s supposed compliments to Junior seem to be both sexual and the words of a father-figure. This may indicate the lack of both a true lover and a supporter in the life of Junior. The novel makes us question why most of the female characters are infatuated with an old man, a man older than their fathers. Why does Morrison create such a controversial figure as a charismatic one, about whom all the women, young or old, are crazy? Perhaps she is trying to portray the depth of distortion and misery in a patriarchal society, where women are physically and mentally dependent on men regardless of their status. The other characters who once lived with the dead man sometimes inadvertently give the reader more information about his real character.

As a minor female character, Vida plays a small part in introducing Bill Cosey to the reader. Just like the other women around Bill, she is attracted to him and adores him regardless of his shortcomings. She recollects memories of Bill Cosey in an idealized way: ‘His pleasure was in pleasing’ (*L*, p. 33) and ‘his laugh, his embracing arm, his instinctive knowledge of his guests’ needs smoothed over every crack or stumble, from an overheard argument among staff or a silly, overbearing wife — ignorant as a plate — to petty theft and a broken ceiling fan’ (*L*, p. 34). Vida respects the dead man and all the information she gives on him portrays an ideal strong male figure, who is capable of managing any issue unsolvable for others, one who knows how to behave and how to act in different situations and with different people with various desires. At one point in the novel’s narrative, Sandler, Vida’s husband, who is more impartial about Bill Cosey, thinks about Vida’s attitude toward Heed, the child-bride: ‘Vida, like most people, probably resented the child because she stayed

married to him, liked it, and took over his business [...] they forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her' (*L*, p. 147).

Like the other women, Vida emphasizes Bill Cosey's benevolent, magnetic character and even for his controversial act of marrying a child, Vida blames Heed instead. Like the others, she does not want to accept the idealized good man's imperfections and transgressions, and to hide them, she substitutes another culprit. She does not wish to remove the false mask from Bill's face and see the reality. She is happy with her vision of a perfect, understanding, well behaved, ideal man of whom Bill Cosey is a projection. However, as other aspects of the narrative indicate, this idealization is inseparable from Bill Cosey's economic power, which basically explains why everyone in the African American community is under his control.

As already mentioned, L, one of the narrators of the novel, is a strong female figure who plays the role of a saviour in the other women's lives. As Vida recollects, when Bill Cosey died, 'once again L restored order, just as she always had' (*L*, p. 34) and 'had it not been for L, the country's role model would never have gotten the dignified funeral he deserved' (*L*, p. 37). Once, L rescues Vida by finding a missing pen, which Vida is falsely accused of stealing. L helps Heed as well in different situations, for example when she returns from honeymoon and is mocked by May and Christine for putting on brand-new adult clothes that still have a ticket on. L comes with a pair of scissors and removes the price tag. Later, when Heed gets spanked in public by Bill Cosey, L threatens him that, if he should repeat this act, she will leave him and his business forever. It is also L who poisons Bill Cosey and changes his will when she finds out that he has given all his property to Celestial and left his family members with nothing. Yet L, who is undoubtedly a powerful female character, is an

admirer of Bill Cosey as well. She praises him and does not magnify his flaws at all. As an independent woman, one does not expect her to act like the other female characters, but she does and it unnerves the reader. The intention of Morrison in portraying all the female characters as dependent on Cosey is perhaps to show the incompleteness that women feel if they are not relying on men in a patriarchal society, where even a respected, steely figure like L is not an exception.

Heed, the dead man's child-wife, tries to find a place of belonging and security in her husband's family but she repeatedly fails. May and Christine are wild at Bill Cosey's choice of a second wife, a girl who is

without a nightgown or bathing suit. Who had never used two pieces of flatware to eat. Never knew food to be separated on special plates. Who slept on the floor and bathed on Saturdays in a washtub full of the murky water left by her sisters. Who might never get rid of the cannery fish smell. Whose family salvaged newsprint not for reading but for the privy. Who could not form a correct sentence; who knew some block letters but not scripts (*L*, p. 75).

They view Heed as a threat to the family's dignity and standing, the passage above demonstrating their sense of class difference. Bill Cosey shocks everyone by choosing Heed as his bride and even the reader, who feels respect toward Bill's success, vacillates in response to this controversial act. Indeed, the bitter enmity between Heed and Christine is ignited by this choice. When Bill marries Heed, his granddaughter's best friend, the two friends turn sworn enemies for years. They henceforth fight over the dead man's love and each one vies with the other to prove that she is Bill's 'sweet Child', as mentioned in his will.



Heed, who is sold by her impoverished parents to Bill Cosey, unwittingly enters a game in which she is doomed to be the loser from the beginning. She tries hard to re-establish her friendship with Christine, who is now full of hatred and jealousy. When she returns from the three-day honeymoon, she has loads of stories to share with her soul-mate, but her best friend's eyes are cold now. Their friendship's turning point is Heed's marriage, and it is not retrieved until the very end of Heed's life when it is too late. Heed and Christine do not realize that the dead man has separated them by his prerogative until it is too late to compensate for the damage. They both struggle to have all Bill Cosey's attention during his life and his property and fame after his death, but they fail to think what a precious homosocial relationship they are sacrificing for a dead man's love and money.

From Heed's naïve narrative perspective, Bill Cosey is a protector who was always vigilant to shield his young wife from the hostility of the other women in his household. He is caring and watchful to avoid any crisis at home. When Christine comes back home after a four-year absence to celebrate her sixteenth birthday, there arises a quarrel between Heed and Christine. Bill Cosey tries to make Christine and May be quiet and stop the assault on his bride. Heed later nostalgically tells Junior about the happy days she spent with her husband and how she felt secure in his company. For example, she tells Junior about the barber's chair he kept at home, and why she treasures it most because 'in the early days of their marriage it was in that very chair that he took pains to teach her how to manicure, pedicure, keep all his nails in perfect shape. And how to shave him, too, with a straight razor and strop. She was so little she had to stand on a stool to reach. But he was nothing but patience, and she learned' (*L*, p. 124). As Heed describes him, he was a kind, considerate man who introduced Heed into the privileged world of a black bourgeois life. Heed does not blame Bill Cosey for destroying

her friendship with Christine and is grateful to him since she regards him as a saviour who redeemed her from living in poverty. As a reader, one may think that all the teachings of Bill Cosey were not for Heed but for his benefit and gratification and the sake of keeping his own face in the public eye.

Indeed, the rich, mature man chooses a child-bride for the sake of moulding her character in a way he wants. He teaches Heed how to behave in a socially acceptable manner and when she fails to behave properly at Christine's party, she gets punished. There is another possibility for the reason for Bill Cosey's marriage to a very young girl. Since he has a lifelong mistress, Celestial, he does not want anyone causing any hindrance between him and his 'sporting woman'. A child-bride would be less likely to interfere in a man's affairs and would not figure out or put a stop to his furtive extra-marital relationships. No one knows that, in reality, Bill has given all his property to Celestial in his will and L, who feels an affectionate responsibility for the family women, then poisons him and fakes another will. Considering his legacy and Sandler's memory of him, in which he said that he was not happy with his wife, one may conclude that he did not care for any of the females in his family at all. All the women in his life have a lifelong battle over him and yet he only really valued Celestial. Heed, who regards him as a kind and protective guardian, never learns – or wants to learn – the side which is revealed by Sandler, and eventually by L, to the reader.

Interestingly, Christine, Bill Cosey's granddaughter, is the only woman in this community who articulates hatred toward him. In *Song of Solomon*, Lena, Milkman's elder sister, who finally launches a tirade against her brother for ruining her life, offers a counterpart to Christine. After Bill Cosey's decision to marry her best friend, Christine feels she has lost that best friend forever. She blames Bill, who she, at the end, declares “took all

my childhood away from me, girl”” (*L*, p. 194). The only person who sees the true patriarchal face of Bill Cosey is Christine, who succeeds in identifying her enemy from the beginning. Yet for the sake of her mother, who directs her hatred toward Heed, she starts a bitter relationship with her former best friend. Christine never forgives ‘Papa’ for the changes that he brings to her life. Once, when she returns from school after four years of being in exile, Heed sets her bed on fire and Papa decides to send Christine away again. May, Christine’s mother, objects and reminds Bill that it is Heed who has committed a terrible act, but she gets the answer that he is married to Heed not to Christine, so it is Christine who has to go to restore peace. This is a turning point in Christine’s life, which deprives her of closeness with her family, changes her future direction, which subsequently includes temporary prostitution and ends in her working as a carer for Heed after May’s death.

Morrison presents both women as having failed in their heterosexual relationships. Christine has been betrayed by all the men in her life. First, her grandfather betrays her by choosing her best friend as his bride and separating Christine and Heed. Bill chooses Heed over Christine once more when Heed sets Christine’s bed on fire and yet it is Christine who is sent away. Christine once describes him as ““the big man who, with no one to stop him, could get away with it and anything else he wanted”” (*L*, p. 133). This is the only time that Christine openly criticizes Bill for her misfortunes. The rest of the time, she is taught by May to blame Heed for the rejection and misery in her life.

In her first marriage, Christine is betrayed by her soldier husband, Ernie Holder, who is caught red-handed in the arms of the staff sergeant’s wife by Christine. In her relationship with Fruit, one can trace a touch of positive communion because ‘there, with him, she was not in the way; she was in. Not the disrupting wife, the surplus mistress, the unwanted nuisance

daughter, the ignored granddaughter, the disposable friend. She was valuable' (*L*, p. 164). She thinks her quest to find someone in whose company she can forge an identity has come to an end. She is happy with Fruit since she felt for the first time that she is truly wanted by someone. Until this point in her life, Christine has always felt as if she is regarded as a nuisance. Yet, Fruit betrays her as well by choosing to be faithful to a sort of male bond, failing to disavow the wrong act of his comrade, an act of sexual violence against a woman. Even Fruit, with whom she has found a kind of peace, chooses someone over her in the sense that fraternity outweighs Christine's sense of justice towards women. Later, Dr. Rio also treats her as a piece of disposable property and throws her away as he takes a new girlfriend. Likewise, Milkman leaves Hagar all of a sudden and commences his journey without considering her emotions.

Since Christine is betrayed over and over by men, she betrays her own peers. She sleeps with other women's husbands, ignoring the fact that once she was in their place. Her answer to Heed about having been a whore is noteworthy. It shows how women who get hurt, instead of taking revenge on men, who are the culprits, take revenge on their peers, regarding them as fragile and easier targets. However, as Morrison finally reveals, losing a man is not equivalent to losing a female friend with whom it would have been possible to enjoy the benefits of homosociality.

Was you a whore?

Oh, Please.

People said.

People lied. I never sold it. Swapped it, though (*L*, p. 186).

Christine exchanges all her anger at being betrayed for a careless life instead, courting casual relationships that earn other women's wrath. She then gets hurt as she takes revenge on Heed for all the faults of her grandfather. Until the end, she never realizes the crucial point that her female friendship would have served her better than taking revenge on women in response to her betrayal by men. In a patriarchal society, women compete and fight over men to make their existence felt, dissipating energy that could be devoted to growth and self-actualisation. Even when she is at odds with Heed while living under the same roof in later life, Christine never tries to kill her, suggesting a need for a living reminder of their friendship or recognition on some level of the importance of that early bond.

Heed is not successful in her heterosexual relationships either. She has remained Bill Cosey's wife as she ignores and/or accepts his secret affairs. She is betrayed by Bill several times and once she too tries to be unfaithful. Her secret affair turns out to be a complete fiasco as her lover never turns up. Thus, she has been replaced by another woman, just like Christine.

As Anissa Janine Wardi concludes about Bill Cosey in her essay, 'A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of *Love*', 'death has done very little to stop the Cosey women from having intimate relations with this powerful patriarch. He over-shadows their lives, their home, and their relationship with one another' (205). Even after his death,

Christine and Heed fail to re-establish their friendship since the resentment which he has brought to them is more than enough to make them lifelong sworn enemies. It is not until the end of the novel that, just like the women in *Sula*, they recognize that they have not been living their lives in a nurturing way and all this time they have been looking for Papa 'everywhere and anywhere' (*L*, p. 189), instead of resuming their old bond when they were one soul in two bodies. Both girls vied to have Bill Cosey's affection while he was alive and they have not yet understood the futility of their struggle. They have been wasting their existences and energy for the attention of a selfish man who did not care for either of them. Instead of making attempts to defeat each other, the two women could have been more powerful and secure if they had reunited.

Bill Cosey's decision to marry Heed destroys another valuable female bond in the novel and that is a mother-daughter relationship. May tries hard to keep distance between Heed and Christine by discouraging Christine from coming back home for school holidays, and this makes Christine think that her mother was ignoring or rejecting her. She teaches her daughter how to hate Heed and is happy when she observes that Christine does exactly what she directs. May spends her old age watching Heed's pain in having disfigured hands, but at the last it is Heed who nurses her until her death. L watched Heed 'soap her (May's) bottom, mash badly cooked food to just the right consistency. She cut May's toenails and wiped white flakes from her eyelids' (*L*, p. 140) but on the other hand, 'May, naturally, was unforgiving and, twenty-eight years later, still loved the sight of her enemy forced to feed her' (*L*, p. 141). Disfigured female characters, mentioned earlier, and the hatred amongst them over the love of a patriarch, contribute to a disturbing picture in the late-twentieth-century setting of the novel's present. Though they spend a lifetime living under the same roof, they never become

united to a positively nurturing female homosociality. There is also a possibility that through working together, female bonding could have empowered them to continue running a successful business, instead of living as dependent survivors on a dead man's money and fame. The hotel was once run properly by these women while Bill Cosey was alive, so if they had been united instead of hating each other, they presumably could have revived or reinvented it.

The only character who has an impartial and different attitude toward Bill Cosey is Sandler, who unveils the dark side of his personality in the narrative. When he remembers how Cosey ran his business, avoiding mingling with locals, he portrays Cosey as someone who tries to hide his egocentrism under the mask of respect for black people. When he reflects back on Bill Cosey's childhood, when he was forced by his father to play in the neighbours' yards and bring him traitorous news of hidden black fugitives in those houses, Sandler feels hatred for him. When Bill Cosey tells him the story of the little girl who fell in horse shit and was laughed at by a crowd, Sandler cannot help thinking that Bill was laughing too, and this prompts Sandler and the reader to despise Cosey. Sandler reveals the parts in Bill Cosey's character which the female characters mostly try to avoid mentioning. The debauched boat trips which he once shared with Bill Cosey bring into the light most of Cosey's wickedness, which the reader cannot infer from the other characters' narration of his life.

### **Heed and Christine's Friendship**

In this part, my main focus will be on the relationship in *Love* of once friends, now sworn enemies, Heed and Christine. In the beginning, the reader is introduced to the pair who share a house through the curious eyes of a newcomer, Junior. After being misled by Christine about Heed's location, Junior goes up two floors to find Heed's room herself. She is surprised to see that

like the kitchen below, this room was overbright, like a department store. Every lamp — six? Ten? — was on, rivalling the chandelier. Mounting the unlit stairs, glancing over her shoulder, Junior had to guess what the other rooms might hold. It seemed to her that each woman lived in a spotlight separated — or connected — by the darkness between them (*L*, p. 25).

As is foreshadowed at the very outset of the story, the relationship between the two old ladies is dark and mysterious. Each of them lives in an illusory world, and each has a fabricated imaginary story about the other one. The route connecting them physically and emotionally is dark and they do not dare to step forward and light the path to each other's heart. The reality is uncovered near the ending of the novel, when for both women an epiphany occurs about their hostile relationship.

The story of Sula and Nel resonates strongly in the relationship of Heed and Christine. As young girls, they were best friends. They were so intimate that they were observed as being like two selves in one skin. They shared precious moments of childhood joy and an invented secret language. Just like Sula and Nel's friendship, which is destroyed by the entrance of a male force, the friendship of Heed and Christine turns to hatred when Bill Cosey decides to marry Heed. The selfish decision of a fifty-two-year-old grandpa, who



wants to marry an unused girl as solace after the death of his young son, totally eradicates the love of the girls and gives them back nothing but hostility. The two, now mature women, went through the harshness of life being deprived of the company of their best female friend.

Close to the end, the reader may be surprised by Morrison's belated revelation of the main theme of the novel. Jean Wyatt, in her informative essay, treats the startling ending and observes

after 183 pages of witnessing the two women's bitter enmity, the ending not only overthrows our expectations of narrative sequence, but reveals that the text has misled the reader about the most basic question one can ask about a novel: What is this story about? At the end, the new information about the characters' past — about the events that caused the whole sequence the reader has just processed — makes the reader reconstruct everything that has come before: the story centres not on the wanderings of male desire, as we had been led to believe, but on the mutual love of little girls.<sup>65</sup>

From the beginning until near the ending of *Love*, one may presume that Bill Cosey is the main character around whose life all other events turns on; finally, a different view is revealed just at the text's conclusion. Heed and Christine's friendship is the prominent closing theme of the novel, something retrieved very late after being destroyed by Bill Cosey. Although from the start the narrator focuses mostly on Bill Cosey's personality and the female characters' relationship to him, here, Morrison uncovers a secret which entirely changes our

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<sup>65</sup> Jean Wyatt, 'Love's Time and the Reader: Ethical Effects of Nachträglichkeit in Toni Morrison's *Love*', *Narrative*, 16/2 (2008), 193-221, at p.194.

assessment of the plot. She tells the reader about Heed and Christine's friendship in their childhood, which turned to enmity in their adulthood through the interference of a man. The narration flashes back to 1940 when Heed and Christine were still best friends and there was not yet a male force between them to split up their bonding.

The key scene starts with the two girls going on a picnic, carrying a picnic basket which L had prepared for them. L, as always, plays the role of a supporting, protective mother figure. Later in their lives, L plays another important role by changing Bill Cosey's will, in which he had dedicated all his wealth to his sporting woman, Celestial, rather than his family. Seemingly always there to assist or intervene on behalf of those who need help, in this action L as a powerful woman tries to subvert the might and 'will' of the patriarch, although it does not fully have the desired effect.

The narrative reveals the two girls have a private hidden palace which is a 'keeled-over row-boat long abandoned to sea grass. They have cleaned it, furnished it, and named it' (L, p. 190). The row-boat may be abandoned and useless, but it creates a safe and secure shelter for them far away from any family strife, and sexual or class discrimination which is abundant back in the hotel. The difference in social status between the two girls is implied by Heed's bathing suit, which is not her own but borrowed from Christine. They may pay no attention to these differences but the grown-ups around them do. When May catches Heed running in the hotel, she tries to humiliate her through a lecture, and by forcing the little girl to carry soiled sheets, May seeks to reaffirm Heed's lower status. The girls have named their warm and friendly private palace after Bill Cosey's mistress, Celestial. Naming something after somebody suggests identifying with that particular person. The naming might indicate that they aspire to be the centre of attention for men and to be loved by them, or that they

appreciate Celestial's difference and her defiant behaviour. The dream of female refuge comes true later in their lives, but when they actually recognize it, it is too late. They have wasted their time going after a treasure which they already had in the felicity of their safe and secure hidden palace. They go after the illusion of love in heterosexual relationships when there was plentiful true love in their female friendship.

In their blue and yellow bathing suits, they resemble the primary colours but lack red, symbol of passion, to be a complete whole. Yet as soon as sexuality, represented by Bill Cosey, enters into their world of innocence, their unity is shattered. We are told 'their hair has been quartered into four braids so they have identical hairstyles' (*L*, p. 190). Whether they themselves have done the hair or someone else, most probably a woman, has done it, there is a desire behind it, an aspiration towards unity.

When Heed returns to the hotel to find the game of Jacks, she encounters Christine's grandfather, Bill Cosey. He asks about her hastiness and she fails to answer, but when he asks about her family she finds she can reply easily: 'The reference to her father helps and her tongue loosens. "Yes, sir."' (*L*, p. 191). This shows the impact of patriarchy on a little girl's life. When she finds herself helpless, the mentioning of her father's name makes her feel at ease and her voice is released. In a male-dominant society, where the father stands for authority, the reference to him empowers her to identify herself with her family and background. It seems as if all her identity is dependent on that given to her by the male figure of the family, the mighty father.

Their conversation develops when Bill Cosey finds sexual innuendo in Heed's full name, 'Heed the Night'. Heed is not aware of the possible sexual connotation of her name, the night being associated with desire, but Bill Cosey, while watching Heed's young body,

interprets it in a sexual way. The innocent girl does not understand what he means by “‘I should. I really should’” (*L*, p. 191) and when she asks about his meaning, she is advised to “‘never mind’” (*L*, p. 191). This short episode reveals a lot about Bill Cosey’s ambiguous character. He goes on to touch Heed’s nipple, or ‘where a nipple will be’ (*L*, p. 191), and this gives Heed the feeling that she had prompted this shameful contact by wiggling her hips. Maybe Bill means ‘I should marry you’, which would show that he regards himself as the supreme power who can do anything according to his desires using his reputation and money. He thinks he is the one who can always decide and choose without the chance of being rejected or thwarted by others. Where a marriage should be a two-sided relationship mutually agreed upon, he chooses someone who is still in her childhood dream world and who measures the time by blowing a bubble with her gum. When Heed wants to seek the meaning of his words, she is advised to be quiet and never mind. Just as she does not share in his interpretation of her name, she has no choice in the most important change in her life, which is decided for her by a patriarchal man who never takes her wishes seriously.

When Heed is released from Bill Cosey’s strange behaviour and conversation, May grabs her, supposedly to teach her how to behave properly in the hotel. She is told ‘how happy they all are that she and Christine are friends and what that friendship can teach her’ (*L*, p. 191). May, who is the daughter of a preacher herself, tries to suppress her sense of inferiority by ordering and belittling people who she thinks are less than herself. Both friendship and marriage with a ‘superior’ are supposed to shape Heed’s character and teach her how to behave correctly in society, but the only one who wants Heed as she is, is her true friend Christine. In their female friendship, neither of them wants to change the other and that is why they both feel ease in each other’s company where they can be what they really are.

Yet when they go back to their private palace, nothing is as before. Morrison first tells the incident through Heed's eyes and describes what has happened to her, then, after the encounter with Bill Cosey, there is a gap of silence between the two girls that even their own invented language fails to fill. The lack of communication here leads to further events, which totally change their lives and destroy their friendship. Their safe and secure place is lost since an interfering presence is felt between them. The 'shadow' of an imposing male finally splits up their homosocial bond and forces Heed to tell the first untruth in their honest relationship, the first being followed by many eventually. Heed tells the first lie because she thinks Christine knows the truth and that 'there is something wrong with Heed. The old man saw it right away so all he had to do was touch her and it moved as he knew it would because the wrong was already there, waiting for a thumb to bring it to life' (*L*, p. 192). This sense of guilt about her body is a typical feeling that women have held within a patriarchal definition of femininity and female sexuality. Heed further contemplates that 'she had started it — not him. The hip-wiggling came first — then him' (*L*, p. 192). Women have always felt guilty about their bodies, which they are taught are only meant to arouse desire in men. Patriarchy demands modesty and purity, but this can lead to women being required to hide a part of their identity and being. Taken to an extreme when a woman is raped, society blames her for starting it herself. Woman's body has long been a site of exploitation and patriarchal men have always tried to guard the female body as a piece of property against damage by other male forces. Through Heed's self-blame and shame, Morrison unravels the initiation of a process of poisoning starting in girlhood.

Meanwhile when Christine goes looking for Heed in the hotel, she sees her grandfather masturbating in her bedroom and it makes her 'ashamed of her grandfather and of

herself' (*L*, p. 192). Like Heed, Christine feels embarrassed because of the sexual arousal in Bill Cosey. Both girls feel guilty and the shame cannot be put into words. They both share the same shame about their bodies and womanhood, which become wrong and dirty to their eyes. Each blames herself and internalizes guilt, fearing that it will show and spread: 'would the inside dirtiness leak?' (*L*, p. 192). They both undergo a horrible first encounter with sexuality, and it makes them blame their own bodies or something 'wrong' inside themselves instead. Perhaps, had they talked about their experiences and put them into words, their own union would not have been shattered by a male force. Their friendship fades away when they try to hide their secrets and keep the supposed dirty experience to themselves. The two girls, who had their own invented language, fail in communication when they encounter the world of patriarchal sexuality for the first time, and this is the start of their bond being sacrificed for the sake of heterosexual relationships. Perhaps they could have kept their love, had they communicated at the most important moment in their lives.

The hostility in their friendship is brought about by the same male force, Christine's grandfather, who soon chooses Heed as a bride. They go on bearing a grudge against each other without realizing the origin of their enmity. Over the years the women reach a mutual if bitter understanding:

along with age recognition that neither one could leave played a part in their un-negotiated cease-fire. More on the mark was their unspoken realization that the fights did nothing other than allow them to hold each other. Their grievances were too serious for that. Like friendship, hatred needed more than physical intimacy; it wanted creativity and hard work to sustain each other (*L*, pp. 73-4).

Here, Toni Morrison reveals that the two girls were connected together by hostility rather than separated by it. What is perhaps important is that they have a kind of relationship, and the relationship is intentionally maintained by both participants as they come to know that, for sustaining the other one, mutual 'creativity' and 'hard work' are required. You can hate your enemy as far as your enemy also takes part in this hostile game. All these years they planned, they fought and they won or lost only to keep each other. Unintentionally, they have retained their female bond but in a negative way. They have always yearned for the closeness of their childhood friendship and, as we will see, the memory of their innocent relationship brings joy to both even now, when they are in their sixties.

At an earlier point in the novel (pp. 78-9), there is a flashback in Heed's interior narrative about the beginning of their friendship. This starts with the shoreline wandering of a little girl, who comes from Up Beach to the Cosey hotel. There is a pun in the name of the place from which the little girl has come. Up Beach is not really a place for upper-class people but for the lowest caste of local black society. As the girl comes to the hotel's beach the mud turns to clean sand, which foreshadows a jump from poverty into the world of prosperity. The poor girl is wearing just a man's undershirt, an appearance which is juxtaposed with that of another girl who is sitting on a red blanket with white ribbons in her hair, eating ice cream. The 'very blue water' (p. 79) and the nearby laughing crowd symbolize a better world to the eyes of the walking girl. The girl on the red blanket innocently invites her to share her ice cream until a smiling woman comes and tells the poor girl to go away since the property is private. The reader realizes the poor girl is Heed, the girl on the red blanket Christine and the smiling woman May. Here May enforces class discrimination and

wants to ward off her daughter from lower-class people. Her smiling mask hides her real feeling toward the poor Up Beach girl.

Years later, in spite of the fact that May did not want Heed to stay while at first Christine did, both started to hate her after her marriage. Heed only secured a place in that upper class of people as Cosey desired her youth and she did not criticize his lifestyle or secret love affair. By letting Cosey do whatever he wants, Heed tries to make a comfortable life for herself. On one occasion, being given the opportunity of receiving love and attention from someone of her own age at the hotel, she tries to be unfaithful to her husband. In this incident the reader may come to know that Heed's love for Bill Cosey is not as genuine as she usually maintains. Her competition with Christine to get Cosey's love and attention is perhaps more an attempt to fix her place as an insider not a social outsider.

Once Vida, while recollecting her memories of the hotel, declares that ““Mr. Cosey was royal; L, the woman in the chef's hat, priestly. All the rest — Heed, Vida, May, waiters, cleaners — were court personnel fighting for the prince's smile”” (*P*, p. 37). Until the ending, when the main preoccupation is revealed, the reader is given the impression that the thirst for Bill Cosey's love from all the women in his surroundings is the main subject of the novel. Yet it is in fact the love relationship between two old enemies, giving the struggle of the women over Bill Cosey's affection another meaning. Apart from L, who shows independent action, the rest of the female characters are living as dependent creatures. Heed depends on Bill Cosey for a secure home and to have a better life than Up Beach can offer; May more or less, like Heed, is bound to Bill Cosey for the same reason. Vida loves Bill Cosey for the respectable job he gives her, as well as its dignified clothing. Christine is the only one who



hates Bill Cosey, but still tries to prove she is the 'sweet Cosey child' mentioned in the will to take her place back in the hotel.

Bill Cosey himself does not care about any of these women, since on one of his boating trips, when Sandler says "everything has its place", he replies "True. Everything. Except women. They're all over the damn place" (*L*, p. 42). He goes on to tell the story of his son's death and adds that the remedy to overcome his grief was a beautiful woman. Bill Cosey pays no attention to the needs of the women in his family, nor to those who try to be next to him just to find a secure place in society. Even the double 'C' engraved on the family silver set is the initial of Celestial, his long term mistress. Heed and Christine have a lifelong fight over this initial, which Christine believes is for her name. They do not even know that their battle over the term 'sweet Cosey child' is futile, since by this epithet Bill Cosey meant none of them but Celestial.

At the very ending of the novel where its true focus is revealed, a conversation between the elderly Heed and Christine takes place in Christine's old room. The site was once a cosy shelter for both where they spent time together in girlhood; but after Heed's marriage to Bill, Christine was deprived of her room and sent to a far-away school. Christine's bedroom thus stands for all she had in her childhood and by being deprived of it she has been deprived of all her best memories. The forget-me-not wallpaper reinforces the notion of childhood friendship between Heed and Christine, something actually not forgotten but transfigured into hostility. Now they both come to know that

We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere.

He *was* everywhere. And nowhere.

We make him up?

He made himself up.

We must have helped (*L*, p. 189).

This epiphany occurs tragically late since Heed dies at the end and Christine is left lonely again. They were prevented from living hand-in-hand and wasted all their time and energy on fighting over a man who did not care for them. Both have been isolated and bitter all through their lives. Jean Wyatt observes that

the phrase, “could have been living our lives,” suggests that the women have not been doing so, that having lost the thread of life, they have been circling fruitlessly somewhere outside life’s temporal progression. The sentence also indicates the cause of their disorientation: “looking for Big Daddy everywhere.” It is the forced entry into patriarchy and premature sexuality that put them off course, that made their attention swerve from the thing that mattered (their friendship) to the only thing that seemed to matter — what the man wanted (198).

The narrative returns to Heed and Christine’s childhood, showing their unsolved problems from the past and immature entrance into the world of adult sexuality. They needed to go back and resolve their rift in order to fulfill their lives. The sad realization of Christine is that ““He took all my childhood away from me, girl”” and Heed continues ““He took all of you away from me”” (*L*, p. 194). They both come to know the futility of what they have been fighting for all these years and what was lacking — but only when it is too late for them.

Morrison misleads us with the novel's title and her late narrative twist. The title *Love* has resonances with all sorts of passionate feelings between humans, and the reader follows the whole novel hoping for a sympathetic male-female love relationship. Considering the different heterosexual unions featured, one can trace no gesture towards any strong and lasting male-female love.

Junior and Romen's love cannot be considered as a positive model as it is shaped by physical impulses alone, and sometimes violent sex dominates their interactions. Examining all the main characters' love affairs, the reader fails to find a genuine romantic love as the title suggests. Instead relationships are full of betrayal, savagely passionate, or emotionless, like the marriage of Vida and Sandler, or May and Billy Boy. It seems Morrison draws a canvas of no love within heterosexual relationships in order to express her message about the girls more clearly.

It is only at the end of the novel that a shift in the whole plot trajectory and emphasis occurs. The spectre of Bill Cosey vanishes suddenly when Heed and Christine are about to retrieve their old female friendship. In the last chapter, when communication is re-established between Heed and Christine, they both come to know that instead of 'living hand in hand' they have wasted their time searching for a ghost to support them. They could both have had a happier and more fulfilled life, retrieving their friendship at least after Bill and May's death, but alas they come to know the real value of their bond so late. The last conversation between the two old friends, mentioned in my introduction, is confusing since the speaker is not identifiable and their voices become one. The conversation takes place after a fierce battle which results in Heed falling from the attic into Christine's old room, Christine being injured

in this fight as well. After such a confrontation, now it seems as if both are one in soul and mind, trying to express the same idea and thought. When Romen finds the two broken women lying on the floor, one embracing the other one, the imagery is very intimate: ‘One is lying on her back, left arm akimbo; the other has wrapped the right arm of the dead one around her own neck and is snoring into the other’s shoulder’ (*L*, p. 194). It reminds us of typical lovers embracing and sleeping freely in each other’s arms, paying no attention to the judgmental eyes of ‘watchers’. Yet until very the end, the reader has to guess which one is dead and which one is alive since the narrator does not mention their names anymore. They have become one again after releasing themselves from the heavy burden of a hollow hostility.

It is at this point that Morrison unveils a crucial bond in the homosocial lives of women which can be more fruitful and promising than their relationship with men. Jean Wyatt perceptively notes that

it is only when Heed confirms the belated mutual recognition of the relationship with Christine that the word surfaces: “Love. I really do” [...]. This articulation avoids the common phrasing, “I love you,” to isolate the word Love and thus forge an identification with the novel’s title. The alignment of true love with the deep friendship between little girls may lead a reader to recognize the narrowness of his or her conventional “knowing” about love and awaken him or her to the possibility of different love stories (214-15).

As Wyatt argues, Morrison surprises the reader late on by introducing a powerful reunion. In this novel, the only promising relationship turns out to be the female bond rather than the

many problematic male-female pairings that are depicted. The narrative mesmerises the reader so that we follow Bill Cosey's ghost everywhere, like Junior in search of a true love relationship between one of the characters and this man. Only at the end does the reader come to know the narrative deception Morrison deployed. Female homosociality, which could be more enabling and self-sustaining for the women in this novel, was never truly established and the years and energies of these protagonists were wasted in loathing each other instead of living their lives fully hand-in-hand.

## **Conclusion**

'Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked' (*L*, p. 5). Here *L*'s words tell the whole story of Heed and Christine and other women who share the same misunderstanding about love; the story of women as rivals who enter a battle with members of their own sex to win the attention of Prince Charming. Women like Ruth or Hagar, who battle against each other to win a man's favour. Women who instead of opening their heart where that little girl is tucked, open their legs and surrender to the 'clown of love' (*L*, p. 63). Women who are tough instead of being brave, just like Heed and Christine. Notwithstanding the fact that they have been living together since Bill Cosey passed away, they are not courageous enough to reconsider the roots of their spiteful relationship. Even when Milkman does not care for either his mother or Hagar, they do not stop bearing a grudge against each other.

In a society where a man like Bill Cosey or Macon Dead stands for money and power, women, to fix a secure place, vie to please him. As *L* mentions, ' "The women' s

legs are spread wide open, so I hum. Men grow irritable, but they know it's all for them" (L, p. 3). The motivation seems to be to have peace of mind and protection in a patriarchal context and a world of class and race inequality. In such an endless battle over men's attention, women sacrifice their female bonding, as we have seen, for instance, in what happens to Heed and Christine. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead and Ruth's father are central patriarchal figures who render the females in their families silent and isolated. Only when they come to the point where they see they are wasting their lives do they rebel, like Corinthians who escapes to follow her own dream.

Even twenty-five years after Bill Cosey dies, the women in *Love* still feud with each other. They compete to have a bigger share of Cosey's love and in fact his money, which gives them social standing in a patriarchal world where they lack independence. Heed and Christine appear to forget their original, innocent friendship from before they were forced to enter the world of adulthood. After being separated, both fail in heterosexual unions. Heed tries to secure her place by ignoring Bill Cosey's affairs, and Christine fails in all sorts of relationships that she enters into. Similarly, in *Song of Solomon*, women compete over the attention of Milkman and prioritise his welfare but they do not step back and look at what female solidarity and self-investment might bring to them. Pilate and Ruth work together against Macon Dead to help Milkman come into this world and again to support him in the journey to find his identity; for both I suggest this represents a patriarchally-informed elevation of the figure of the son and the glimpse of the potential of their female homosociality is never held on to.

The two novels paired together in this chapter seem to have a similar overall structure. In both, the story turns around a male figure and the women take their identity from connections to men. What makes them distinct is that in *Song of Solomon* women give a man life and help him to mature and find a fulfilling identity while they assume their narrative significance in relation to his quest. Meanwhile in *Love*, which Morrison wrote twenty-five years later, she shows the internalisation of patriarchal values and women's rivalry over an idealised man even long after his death, but also offers a final twist that prompts a powerful reassessment for the reader. While at the ending of *Song of Solomon* Pilate sacrifices her life for the sake of Milkman, *Love* concludes with a late, perhaps redemptive affirmation of a true loving friendship between women.

Although both novels share similarities in the approach to female homosociality, while in the earlier *Song of Solomon* women organize their lives around dominant or privileged male family members, in her later work *Love* Morrison chooses an unusual dead patriarchal figure to show the enduring idea and force of patriarchy, even after the agent is removed or has disappeared. In my next chapter, I will turn to two of Morrison's historical novels in which slavery is the main agent of disruption and damage.

## Chapter Three

### Female Homosociality and the Impact of Slavery in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*

#### Introduction

The two most significant Morrison novels which tackle slavery directly are *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008). Despite settings in different periods — *Beloved*, which was written earlier, covers the end of slavery and the Reconstruction era and *A Mercy*, written later on, covers the early stages of slavery — they both examine the same issue: the impact of slavery on black families and especially on female homosociality. In this chapter, my main focus will encompass both novels through the lenses of the respective contemporary social backgrounds and the influences of racial hierarchy on female bonds. The chapter will start by examining *A Mercy* since the setting of the story is the colonial, early slavery era, and this will help me to find a way through to then explore the end of slavery and the aftermath of the consequences it leaves for female homosociality. Slavery is always in the background in most of Morrison's works, but in these two important novels the issue is encountered more directly, thus this analysis will show its centrality to the whole thesis, which enquires into the influence of factors like patriarchy and racism on female bonding.

Morrison's ninth novel is set in the 1690s, a period encompassing the early growth of slavery in American history.<sup>66</sup> The time setting of this novel has proved controversial, since

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<sup>66</sup> As Giddings writes: "in 1661 Virginia gave official statutory recognition to slavery" (37) and she continues by explaining the laws which mostly affected black women: "At the same time, children born of a Black woman, no



some critics believe that Morrison has deliberately chosen this era to portray the origins of slavery in America, before racial hierarchies and definitions were fully fixed, and draw parallels to the contemporary twenty-first-century moment in race relations. For instance, in her essay, Jessica Wells Cantiello lists some reviewers of *A Mercy* whose ideas centre on comparing the time span of the novel and the contemporary era.<sup>67</sup> Certain critics argue that Morrison wrote this novel in response to the context of the first election of Barack Obama in 2008, and they try to uncover the political intentions they assume Morrison had while writing the fiction. This chapter does not elaborate such a connection. While the main focus of this analysis will be the diverse connections between women, the particular effects of slavery on their bonds will be drawn out as well.

Commenting on the narrative of *A Mercy*, Valerie Babb writes that

the novel tackles this immense epic through the individual voices of characters. Complementing the discourse of historical documents is a narrative created in large part by traditionally ignored perspectives: a Native American woman, a white lower-class English woman, white indentured servants, an abandoned white girl,

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matter who the father was, would inherit her status [...] of a slave” (37). This ominous law gave the freedom of sexually exploiting black women by their masters to produce more slaves and consequently more working labour. Earlier she mentions the situation of English women sold as wives: “in the same year, [16]90 ‘young and incorrupt’ English women were sold to the Virginia settlers as wives for 120 pounds of tobacco each” (34). Then Giddings points out the discriminatory laws on the status of black servants- slaves- and white servants/ wives. In *A Mercy*, Morrison draws a canvas of different women, from various backgrounds- a black slave, a white English wife, a native servant- and shows how their racial background affects their lives. For more information on the early years of slavery in America see: Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984), pp. 33-9.

<sup>67</sup> Jessica Wells Cantiello, ‘From Pre-racial to Post-racial: Reading and Reviewing *A Mercy* in the Age of Obama’, *MELUS: Toni Morrison: New Directions*, 36/2 (2011), 165-83.

and a black female slave. Each character adds a piece to a communal quilt, and the novel's narrative structure privileges no one voice over another.<sup>68</sup>

Babb adds to the dialogue of other critics who comment on the time frame of the novel. She believes that Morrison has chosen this time span in order to show the mixed beginnings of America through the various characters she brings into the novel. At the centre, there is a Native American woman, Lina, and there is also a white lower-class English woman, Rebekka. While Sorrow is depicted as a helpless lost white girl, on the other hand there is Florens, another dependant, who is a black slave girl. As mentioned above, the stories of all these characters help shape the whole narrative, and show America as an intimately multi-racial country, although in the beginning — the time depicted in the novel — the discrimination and classifications of slavery were already coming into existence.

Tessa Roynon offers a Miltonic reading of Morrison's *A Mercy*:

It is in *A Mercy* that Morrison most obviously shares Milton's preoccupation with (if not his perspectives on) the conflicts between order and chaos, reason and sexual desire, and the divine and the human. His fascination with the nature of power and government, with the status of women, with the relationship between Puritanism and Roman Catholicism, with the limits of language and literature, and even with the viability (or otherwise) of binary oppositions, resonates significantly in the contemporary work.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Valerie Babb, 'E Pluribus Unum: The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*', *MELUS: Toni Morrison: New Directions*, 36/2 (2011), 147-64, p. 149.

<sup>69</sup> Tessa Roynon, 'Her Dark Materials: John Milton, Toni Morrison, and Concepts of "Dominion" in *A Mercy*', *African American Review*, 44/4 (2011), 593-606, p. 593.

As Roynon's reading suggests, Morrison depicts and breaks down the 'binary oppositions' which are likewise introduced in Milton's works. Morrison takes her reader to an era which is less explored and familiar in order to portray the unsettled New World. The beginning of the forming of order, discipline, classification, and stark religious battles is set alongside elements of social chaos, sexual desires, and human needs. As the New World, which is being settled, gains form, the Old World, where the immigrants are coming or escaping from, is associated with corruption and strict religious beliefs.

Valerie Babb suggests that 'Morrison reveals how development of a culture based on marketplace values corrupts and undermines the human value of all races, classes, genders, and sexualities' (150). Babb examines the aftermath of building a new structure upon the economic value of human beings and foresees the result. In this novel, the treatment of Florens as an object both by the blacksmith and the Puritans reinforces Babb's analysis. Echoing Babb's reading, Geneva Cobb Moore writes that

in the aftermath of postmodernism, parody and deconstruction become weapons with which writers like Morrison can excavate and recreate history, and then question the legitimacy of established 'truths' of the master discourse on race and class.<sup>70</sup>

As Babb and Moore both discuss, the validity of a history which was built upon the so-called legitimate trading of humans and so-called legal conquering of a land whose occupants were decimated by the newcomers needs a review. Morrison shapes multiple perspectives in order to reconstruct a consciously fractured truth and show the past events in a wider scope.

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<sup>70</sup> Geneva Cobb Moore, 'A Demonic Parody: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 44/1 (2011), 1-18, p. 2.

On a very large canvas, in *A Mercy*, Morrison portrays a variety of female characters who come from different places and live together on Jacob Vaark's farm in the middle of a New World wilderness. In this multi-racial household, there are several bonds among women which will be studied in detail in this part. Echoing what happens in *Love*, a male character brings all these women together and, in this case, the connections that they establish are dependent on their economic relationship to Jacob. As a landowner, Jacob preserves the right of being the master for all these women, but it is a mostly benevolent household in which women's relations become central. The story commences with Florens's internal monologue on her journey to find the blacksmith. Only Florens and her mother tell their stories in a first-person narrative, whereas the stories of others are narrated in the third person. This distinctive technique highlights the importance of the mother-daughter relationship between Florens and her mother, which forms a major thread of the novel. As a multi-layered fiction, the work is slowly unfolded as different characters come to light and each of their stories is developed chapter by chapter. As we will later see in *Beloved*, Morrison captivates her reader by unveiling the truth stage by stage. Through a surprising twist in the ending, only after finishing the novel is the reader able to put the pieces of the puzzle together and understand what the whole is about. Revealed bit by bit, each story completes the others and contributes a significant share in the whole scheme of the novel. It seems that the fragmented narrative form of *A Mercy*, which jumps from one incident to another and links the life stories together, reflects the havoc of the colonial era and the early effects of slavery's classification of the human race. Indeed, Morrison portrays multiple forms of slavery across race, which will be discussed in later parts of the chapter. As in *Beloved*, the writer shocks her reader by unveiling the damaging effects of slavery and its extreme consequences.

Set in a rural North Eastern area in the 1690s, the narrative encompasses Florens's journey to collect a blacksmith, who seemingly has knowledge of herbal medicines to cure her mistress's illness. Meanwhile, the narrative moves backward and forward in different time frames to tell what has happened before to other characters and what is going to happen afterwards. The girl's journey takes place in the middle of the plot and it is where the main narrative begins. Although, on the surface, it seems that the journey of Florens is the main theme of the novel, the life stories of other characters each play a significant role in conveying the main message. Therefore, my focus will be on a closer study of female connections, either friendly or hostile, and either between biological mothers and daughters, or between surrogate mothers and their daughters. These relations will also be discussed in terms of the particular impact of slavery. I will turn to comparisons with *Beloved* later in the chapter.

### **Female Solidarity in *A Mercy***

As the owner of an isolated farm in need of workers, Jacob gathers together all sorts of homeless and helpless people. An abandoned child like Sorrow is taken in by him as well as Rebekka, who is sent from England as a wife for him. Florens is taken as reimbursement for her owner's debt, and Lina is bought as a 'servant' by him. The population of women in Jacob's household is prominent and they are mostly responsible for managing Jacob's property in his long absences. This household, which shelters all these homeless women, echoes the household of 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved*, in which a wanderer like Beloved is welcomed by Sethe and Denver. Although the house is owned by Jacob and he is the one who

gathers all the female characters together, significantly, the connections between these women are mostly forged as independent from their relationship to Jacob.

Female connections at Jacob's house are multi-lateral, comprised of both friendly and hostile relationships. As I will later examine in *Beloved*, the connections between women which are offered by Morrison are confusing: healing and at the same time damaging. For instance, once Rebekka and Lina were friends and kept good company, but after Rebekka's widowhood, her behaviour towards Lina changes to hostility. Lina and Florens are connected as mother and daughter, though in reality they have no blood connection. Lina helps Sorrow, but still she retains an ambivalent, distrustful attitude towards her. Although all female connections are significant in the novel, and they are each unique, the relationship between Rebekka and Lina is one more sharply drawn and highlighted by the writer.

As the reader comes to know, Rebekka has grown up in a turbulent seventeenth-century London. As soon as her father hears of the inquiry of a wealthy man in America searching for a wife, he suggests 'his eldest girl. The stubborn one, the one with too many questions and a rebellious mouth'.<sup>71</sup> Rebekka is raised under the vigilant eyes of a fanatical mother, whom she hates. Her mother poisons her notion of religion by teaching her that it is 'a flame fuelled by wondrous hatred' (*AM*, p. 72). At the end, it is Rebekka's resurgent obsession with religion which brings her self-destruction. Having grown up in a family who took their children to watch executions and taught them the fear of God in a terrifying way, it is not surprising that at the end Rebekka impoverishes her life and her homosocial bonds with her distorted way of being religious. The impact of Rebekka's mother in her life will be discussed in more detail in the section of this chapter looking at mother-daughter relations.

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<sup>71</sup> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008) (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 72.

Morrison depicts how, in seventeenth-century Europe, Rebekka has no opportunity to choose whom she is going to marry since her father is the one who decides for her. She has no choice other than to obey her father and accept an undefined future. Despite such uncertainty and dependency, the marriage is depicted as successful. She becomes an ideal wife for Jacob, since according to him

there was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger. Saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings, took to chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and invention, cheerful as a bluebird  
(*AM*, p. 18).

Here, evaluating her on the basis of how much work on the farm she can do without complaint or how she cooks and serves her husband, the narrative shows Jacob's materialistic, patriarchal view of women. Both men in Rebekka's life, her father and her husband, carry a materialistic view of her. Her father seeks to get rid of her, as he regards her as rebellious and exchanges her for a gift of food and clothes. On the other hand, Jacob evaluates her on the basis of her physical abilities and it seems that her mind and personal feelings are not of importance at all.

Even bearing in mind current gender expectations, Morrison makes clear that Rebekka does not enjoy an equal male-female relationship in her heterosexual union, although she is devoted to Jacob. Inequality is explored even more starkly in Native servant Lina's damaging experiences with men, to be discussed later. I will now turn to a closer look at the female-female relationships that both these characters have, and the connection between them will be studied as well. Picking up on the main argument of this section, I will

examine the first encounter between Rebekka and Lina. As soon as Rebekka comes to Jacob's farm, where Lina is already established, an instant hostility between them begins: 'the health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife; while the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina' (*AM*, p. 51). However, Morrison unfolds how quickly they grow and are united:

They became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other's arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence. Not only because one had to hold the head while the other one tied the trotters. Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. Together, by trial and error they learned (*AM*, p. 51).

Through listing the domestic chores which demand two people, the narrator builds up a sense of the everyday struggle Lina and Rebekka have gone through and what unites them. It is learning how to deal with jobs they had no idea about before which brings them together and makes them grow together. The word 'learned', which the writer places at the end of the quotation, stands for the growth and development in their personalities which they achieved by being united. Nowhere in the novel does Morrison mention any similar kind of process happening between Rebekka and Jacob. The female bond is the one which helps them grow and discover their abilities. The bonding between them also helps them to endure the isolation which living on a New World farm imposes on them. The initial suspicion between these two women is affected by the jealousy which patriarchy teaches women, causing them to view each other as rivals. Rebekka becomes irritated when she realises that there is a young woman already living with her husband and regards her as a threat. On the other hand, Lina envies the



newcomer who suddenly is going to be her mistress and the lady of the house. Eventually, Morrison demonstrates how female homosociality and a common purpose overcome this enmity and bring the two together.

Lina helps and supports Rebekka in different moments of crisis. Lina is always there for Rebekka, for example when she is in labour. Lina acts as an efficient midwife at the birth of her mistress's children. She helps her to overcome the misery of losing her daughter, as the narrator comments: 'More and more it was in Lina's company that she let the misery seep out' (*AM*, p. 76). This suggests that Rebekka turns to Lina, not Jacob, for emotional support. In addition, Lina puts her own life in danger in order to save Rebekka and her daughter's life when a sudden blizzard strikes and Jacob is away. She saves them all from starvation: 'it was Lina who dressed herself in hides, carried a basket and an axe, braved [...] the mind-numbing wind [...] filled her basket with all she could spare; tied the basket handle to her braid to keep her hands from freezing' (*AM*, p. 98). Lina is depicted as committed and courageous by the writer, and the scene quoted above shows that her bond is more than that of a servant to her mistress. Although Lina has a stronger character than Rebekka, an inequality sometimes remains in their relationship. It is suggested that Lina's sacrifice is one-way and she does not ask for anything in return from Rebekka. They share company and affection but differences of race and class will be seen to return later on.

When Rebekka becomes ill, it is Lina who stays with her and nurses her:

Lina placed magic pebbles under Mistress's pillow; kept the room fresh with mint and forced angelica root in her patient's festering mouth to pull bad spirits from her body. She prepared the most powerful remedy she knew: mugwort, Saint-

John's-wort, maidenhair and periwinkle; boiled it, strained it and spooned between  
Mistress' teeth (*AM*, p. 48).

Echoing the character of Lone in *Paradise*, Lina has the commonly shared knowledge of healing among women that recurs in Morrison's fiction. They both apply their legacy of healing power to rescue other women. In a larger scope, Lina in *A Mercy*, L in *Love*, Lone in *Paradise*, and even Pilate in *Song of Solomon* all share the same extraordinary abilities which make them distinguishable among other female, and all male, characters. In most of Morrison's works, there is a respected female character that is the mouthpiece of wisdom and possesses supernatural powers. Morrison portrays the saviours of wounded women as women themselves and not men. Considering the fact that in ancient mythologies and civilizations, like the Greek, Hindu, and Persian, there is a goddess of wisdom (Athena, Saraswathi, and Mitra respectively), Morrison's depiction is not far away from celebrating a collective unconscious. In relation to this, it is also worth noting that in the author's matrifocal black families, it is commonly the grandmother who is the source of knowledge although her daughters and granddaughters do not always inherit her wisdom. Thus Lina, L, Lone, Pilate, and True Belle play a distinctive role in the wider canvas Morrison portrays and in demonstrating the patterns of female support she depicts.

Given Rebekka's religious background, it is significant that Lina is the one with whom she dares to share her profane thoughts. Together they discuss God's relation to humanity:

Oh but, Miss, we sing and talk. Peacocks do not.

We need to. Peacocks don't. What else do we have?

Thoughts. Hands to make things.

All well and good. But that's our business. Not God's. He's doing something else in the world. We are not on His mind.

What is He doing then, if not watching over us?

Lord knows.

And they sputtered with laughter, like little girls hiding behind the stable loving the danger of their talk (*AM*, pp. 78-9).

Lina is the one to whom Rebekka can open her heart and with whom she can think aloud. She shares her doubts about her family's Christian beliefs with Lina and is not scared of the consequences. The level of trust Rebekka shows towards Lina and the safety and security that Lina provides for Rebekka are noteworthy here. Lina endangers herself for her mistress, and Rebekka can trust her to open her heart. It is only when Jacob dies that such intimacy and support disintegrate.

Although in all the above-mentioned situations and many more Lina helps Rebekka, at the end, after losing Jacob and then obsessively seeking God's affirmation, Rebekka breaks their bond. As a widow, Rebekka is transformed and returned to a religious community to counter her perceived isolation and precarity in the wilderness. As Sorrow, another female inhabitant of Jacob's house, observes, Rebekka 'seemed completely alone in the world. Sorrow understood that servants, however many, would not make a difference. Somehow their care and devotion did not matter to her. So Mistress had no one — no one at all' (*AM*, p.128). Sorrow also adds that after her bereavement Rebekka only pays attention to one being, and that one is the Lord that she praises. There, the trace of Rebekka's religious background, and her turn to the church for security, is hinted at by the narrative as ruining the

female bonding between Rebekka and Lina. The patriarchal God that Rebekka worships, partly in order to hold onto her property as a widow in a male-dominant society, is shown to disrupt the solidarity among women.

At the end of the novel, when Jacob dies and Rebekka survives her own illness, she starts to regard Lina as a heathen and forces changes into Lina's life. For instance, though she herself formerly accompanied Lina in her river bathing, now she bans her from the act and regards it as primitive and improper. They used to enjoy the water together before, showing the ease both felt in each other's company and with exposing their bodies, but later on Rebekka's boundaries change sharply: 'Rebekka sat in her underwear rinsing her neck and arms. Lina as naked as the baby she held in her arms, lifted him up and down' (*AM*, p. 92). The sense of female community and sensuality detailed here changes later, when Rebekka loses Jacob and seeks security within a larger group ruled by the patriarchal normative and ethnically homogenous. Later, I will examine another bathing scene in which Rebekka is scared by a moose and saved by Lina. Dynamics of homosociality and heterosexuality are drawn out by paralleling the two bathing episodes.

After her transformation, Rebekka takes down Lina's hammock and forces her to sleep inside. As Lina's mistress, Rebekka starts to judge her from a Western, religious perspective. She forces Lina to accompany her to the church but leaves her outside, since she thinks Lina should not be allowed in a sacred place like church. We can conclude that when Jacob dies and Rebekka loses her male support in life, she seeks the reassurance of a deity and an ordered community. Although she was cared for and supported by Lina, her female friend, as a typical woman of the era — a slave to patriarchal values — ultimately she thinks that she is powerless without Jacob. She turns to God as an alternative source of strength, and

she never comes to know what she has really lost in this futile attempt. On the other hand, as a widow, Rebekka feels compelled to align herself with a local community and practise what is sacred to them in order to keep her position and Jacob's property after his death. The patriarchal values of a supremacist society force Rebekka to break from female homosociality and conform to a dictated role in order to maintain security as a woman in such an environment.

Scully, who sometimes works on the farm, observes that

such were the ravages of Vaark's death. And the consequences of women in thrall to men or pointedly without them. Or so he concluded. He had no proof of what was in their minds, but based on his own experiences he was certain betrayal was the poison of the day (*AM*, p. 153).

Scully's speculation supports the above argument since in a parallel fiction, *Love*, Morrison shows what happens to female bonding when a man comes first in the prime order. Jacob is the one who brings all these women together and although he is away most of the time, it seems he and his farm are the reasons why the women around him are united. Although Rebekka and Lina have a more sisterly friendship for most of their lives, their relationship retreats back to a mistress-servant hierarchy after Jacob's death. Both Rebekka's strict religious beliefs and the absence of the man they all served account for this radical change in Rebekka's attitude. Yet while Rebekka changes, Lina still behaves as she has always done. Like L in *Love*, Lina remains a wise, supporting presence who neither transgresses nor complains. She watches what happens around her and passes comments via the narrative focalisation, but she never changes her devoted attitude toward Rebekka. The difference

between Lina and Rebekka can be linked to whether they are entangled in dominant gender ideas or not. Since Lina is free from European conventions and heterosexual relations, she appears to sustain a stronger character than Rebekka during the hard times. Rebekka conforms to patriarchal values and associated patterns of property holding, and so sacrifices female bonding while Lina does not.

To support this argument, I will turn to Florens's recollection of Jacob's ritual of bathing every May. She remembers that they — all the women — would gather to pour the hot water and prepare the bath for the master. She comments that when it comes to the turn of Mistress, “He does not scrub her. He is in the house to dress himself” (*AM*, p. 68). Indirectly, she compares the dedication Rebekka shows toward Jacob and the indifference of a patriarch to the services he receives. In this assessment, the emotional balance is lost and the receiver gives nothing in return. The dedication of Rebekka is regarded as a loving duty and, on the other hand, Jacob shows less consideration for her. On the same day, as Rebekka bathes, a moose approaches from the woods and scares her. Lina throws a stone towards the animal, and makes him move away. In her fear Rebekka runs to Jacob, something that arouses curiosity in Florens's mind. She asks Lina why the mistress ran to him and Lina answers back, because she can. Here, the narrator again juxtaposes the power and ‘protection’ of the heterosexual relationship and potential homosocial connections. Although the indifferent behaviour of Jacob is highlighted by the bathing episode, still Rebekka runs to him for safety, notwithstanding the fact that it is Lina who actually dispels the threat. Morrison thus indicates that although women receive less care from men than from their female companions, they still regard men as more powerful creatures, who can bring them safety and

can secure their place in society. Although again it is Lina who protects Rebekka, Rebekka still considers Jacob as her provider and supporter.

I will close this section with another example of a female relationship which plays an influential role in Rebekka's life. This is her connection with her shipmates prior to her marriage. When Rebekka boards the ship to join Jacob in America, along with five other women, she is sent to the lower deck where they are separated from 'males and better-classed women' (*AM*, p. 79). They have to spend days in a place of havoc:

A dark place below next to the animal stalls. Light and weather streamed from a hatch; a tub for waste sat beside a keg of cider; a basket and a rope where food could be let down and retrieved. Anyone taller than five feet hunched and lowered her head to move around (*AM*, p. 79).

These women have been separated from the rest of the people on the ship as if they have a contagious disease. They have been treated like animals, and yet they try to make their journey more comfortable by accompanying each other in the shared misery:

Together they lightened the journey; made it less hideous than it surely would have been without them. Their alehouse wit, their know-how laced with their low expectations of others and high levels of self-approval, their quick laughter, amused and encouraged Rebekka. If she had feared her own female vulnerability, travelling alone to a foreign country to wed a stranger, these women corrected her misgivings (*AM*, p. 80).

These women teach Rebekka how to be strong and, as the narrator suggests, their ‘low expectations of others and high levels of self-approval’ encourage Rebekka to overcome her own ‘vulnerability’ and fears. These women are a gift to the miserable Rebekka, who is unwanted at her own house and is sent (and sold) to wed a man she has never met before. The writer introduces these women into Rebekka’s life to lessen her pain and misery. Although these women are lower-class, and most of them are prostitutes or thieves, their influence on Rebekka’s life and self-actualization is far more constructive than the destructive teachings of her own parents, to which I will return later.

Even during her sickness, Rebekka sees the silhouettes of these women coming to her:

Sometimes they circled her bed, these strangers who were not, who had become the kind of family sea journey creates. Delirium or Lina’s medicine, she supposed. But they came and offered her advice, gossiped, laughed or simply stared at her with pity (*AM*, p. 79).

Having them on her mind years later shows the impact of the female homosociality they bestowed upon Rebekka. In such a desperate situation that she is losing hope of life, these women appear and bring her solace and comfort. Although their journey to America only took a short period of time, the positive influence of the female bonding is still with Rebekka after all these years. It is interesting that, battling with sickness, she does not see the ghost of her husband but rather she sees the image of the women who once taught her how to be strong and resourceful.

The ship voyage represents the passage to the New World in the context of — sometimes forced — 1690s migration and settlement. This trip could be a possible parallel to



the Middle Passage that Africans took to America as slaves, elsewhere depicted in the narrative of Florens's mother. Morrison juxtaposes the New World formation and the Old World tradition to draw an account of the early history of slavery in America. In the New World, all these arrivants will form a new nation and Jacob's farm can be seen to encapsulate such a multi-racial community. Despite all the differences, the status of women remains the same in both old and new worlds, and neither the society nor the land changes this for the better. Despite the damages done by the patriarchy, Morrison depicts glimpses of solace and redemption for women, as brought to them by their peers and through their solidarity. Although, for example, Rebekka's relationship with Lina turns from one of intimacy to indifference, their shared times and the vision of women aboard ship reveal the potential of female homosociality.

A last example of female solidarity is offered by the relationship between the women of Jacob's house and Sorrow, specifically when she gets smallpox. Although the other characters have an ambivalent relationship to Sorrow because of her strangeness and perceived mental incapacity, in a time of need they unite to help her overcome the sickness. What is interesting here is that again Rebekka's coolness toward Sorrow is because of Jacob. She fears that Sorrow is pregnant by Jacob, and turns against Sorrow and not her husband. It is easier to blame the less powerful figure, which is defenceless Sorrow. Yet, as a community living together, the women take care of each other when it is needed. Though now and then they bear a grudge against each other, living in the remote wilds they depend on one another, often more than they depend on Jacob. When Jacob is away, the women manage the farm and the house independently, and they enjoy each other's help and company. After Jacob's death, the economic and heterosexual underpinnings of the home become clear, and unfortunately

Rebekka loses sight of the true value of their bonding. As mentioned, these women can be paralleled with the female characters in *Love*. In both novels, the female characters to some extent define their identity in relation to the man who is in the centre. The difference between the novels is that, in *Love*, this is reinforced by a conclusion that affirms female homosociality, where in *A Mercy*, Morrison leaves it to the reader to think about a more mixed resolution. Here, one never can figure out whether Rebekka or the other characters regret the sacrificed female bonds they had or not. In the following section, I will discuss the mother-daughter relationships introduced in the novel in more detail.

### **Mother-Daughter Relationships in *A Mercy***

At Jacob's farm, mother-daughter relationships are various and complex. Rebekka comes from an extremely religious family in which she did not experience an ideal mother-daughter bond. Lina is a survivor of a contagious disease which took away her Native parents, and she can hardly remember her connection to her mother. Florens is separated from her slave mother to work for Jacob to pay off her master's debt, and finally Sorrow appears to be orphaned and to have no recollection of a mother at all. As I will argue, however, mothering roles remain significant and shed light on Morrison's preoccupation with homosociality.

Through most of the narrative, at Jacob's house there is no example of a blood mother-daughter relationship, but the nurturing connection between Lina and Florens is worth examination here. Throughout her journey to find the blacksmith, Florens dwells on the fact that her mother preferred to keep her baby boy and give her away to Jacob for the reimbursement of her master's debt. The image she portrays of her mother leads the reader to

believe that her mother has acted heartlessly and succumbed to patriarchal values, preferring her baby boy to her daughter. In the early pages of the novel, Florens, reflecting on changes at the farm, tells us that ‘I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose [...] saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand’ (*AM*, p. 6). The reader assumes that she was rejected and her mother sacrificed her in order to keep her son. It is only at the end of the novel, when Florens’s mother has a voice and narrates her life story, that the reader comes to know that her act was an absolute sacrifice to protect her daughter. As she has been sexually abused herself and she has seen the growing desire in her master towards her daughter, she has no solution except sending her daughter away. As she thinks, ‘To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if the scars form, the festering is ever below’ (*AM*, p. 161). This echoes the story of Sethe and her daughter in *Beloved*, where the slave mother has to ignore her own motherly affections and needs in order to protect her daughter by removing her from a cruel, racist, and patriarchal world, where black women suffer doubly. The mother-daughter relationship between Florens and her mother is broken due to the devastating force of slavery. The mother might not be sure about the future which is waiting for her daughter at Jacob’s, but she pleads with Jacob to take Florens away. She has noticed the upcoming threat of sexual violence for her daughter and she struggles to make sure she will be safe. As a helpless woman who suffers racial and sexual oppression within slavery, she tries to at least keep her daughter away from what she has experienced. What she has done for her daughter, although seen by Florens as a betrayal, invites sympathy from the reader. This is one of the frequent examples where Morrison shows what slavery has done to black families, demolishing the connections between family members.

However, what Florens lacks in life, a close mother-daughter relationship, is compensated for by her connection to Lina. On Lina's side, Florens is regarded as a cherished companion for whom she will always care:

Lina has fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks but when she did her light, singsong voice was lovely to hear. Some how, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything. Perhaps her own barrenness sharpened her devotion. In any case, she wanted to protect her (*AM*, p. 58).

The connection Lina establishes with the young Florens is far more devoted than any blood mother-daughter relationship mentioned in the novel. In the quotation above, the way the narrator describes Lina's affection toward the little girl is like an ideal family bond with an aspect of maternal protection. The narrator refers back to Lina's background and poses Florens as a mediator who connects Lina to her past, to her tribal roots. Lina fills the gap Florens feels after losing her connection to her mother and, on the other hand, Florens acts as a family, something taken from Lina when she was too young. Morrison suggests that they both compensate for the lacks in each other's lives.

Lina shares her bed with Florens and tells her stories filled with knowledge to sharpen her learning. She tries her best to protect her against any threat from the society beyond and primarily against men, as she considers Florens a 'quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement. Before destruction. Before sin. Before men' (*AM*, p. 59). Despite all Lina's efforts, Florens falls in love with the blacksmith. Although Lina tries hard

to be an obstacle between them, Florens cannot keep the blacksmith out of her mind and regards him as her only saviour. Lina is worried about Florens since she does not consider the blacksmith to offer an equal, reciprocal love, since he is evidently a man ‘that had not troubled to tell her good-bye’ (*AM*, p. 59). When Lina finds out that Florens has survived the first part of her journey to the blacksmith, she is ‘relieved that so far nothing bad had happened to Florens, and more frightened than ever that something would’ (*AM*, p. 63). On the other hand, Florens remembers Lina’s teachings on her journey. Once, when she fears getting lost in the woods, she observes ‘I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness’ (*AM*, p. 40). This one sentence alone brings out different meanings. Florens says I ‘need’ her, which shows how dependent she used to be on Lina for guidance. The reference to ‘wilderness’ also indicates Lina’s wisdom as a Native, managing to survive and keep her identity in the unsettled America of the 1690s. In a revision of Native Americans guiding newcomers from Europe here, Lina acts as support and motherly mentor for a young African American. Still, at this point, Florens does not realize the full importance of Lina in her life and she follows her own way, searching for the blacksmith. This heterosexual priority in some ways parallels Rebekka’s devotion to Jacob.

As the story goes on, the reader comes to know that what Lina feared for Florens becomes true. Florens returns from her journey broken-hearted, and it is Lina who stands by her and tries to empower her again. Lina, who has herself suffered at the hands of a former European lover, foresees what will happen to a black slave girl in a patriarchal and racist society. Lina is more informed about the threats waiting for Florens out beyond the farm and the dangers of a free man. As mentioned earlier in this section, although Lina acts as a surrogate mother for Florens, her devotion to her is far greater than in most of the mother-

daughter relationships depicted in the novel. Comparing this bond to that between Rebekka and her mother, for instance, throws the two relationships into a clearer light.

Rebekka has been brought up in a rigid orthodox religious family, who gave her away since she was ‘stubborn’ and had a ‘rebellious mouth’ with ‘too many questions’ (*AM*, p. 72). In a family where she was taken to watch the execution of non-conformists and, as a child, taught the fear of God in the most extreme way, fanaticism rather than love and affection dominate. Her parents ‘saved their fire for religious matters’ (*AM*, p. 72). Rebekka thus does not object when she is sent away, as if in exile like the thieves and prostitutes who share her ship to the New World. We are told Rebekka’s mother was against her

“sale” — she called it that because the prospective groom had stressed “reimbursement” for clothing, expenses and a few supplies — not for love or need of her daughter, but because the husband-to-be was a heathen living among savages (*AM*, p. 72).

This passage reveals that such a mother is not able to establish a sustaining mother-daughter relationship with Rebekka. Under patriarchal norms, the father passes on his daughter to another man — the husband — who here offers gifts in exchange. What matters the most in Rebekka’s mother’s life is her religious beliefs, to the point that she does not care about the happiness and safety of her daughter, but rather the only thing she cares about is the non-conformist ‘heathen’ society she is entering. The narrator explicitly comments that Rebekka’s mother is not against this marriage because she loves her daughter or wants to protect her from harm. If, in early American society, the connection between a mother and daughter has been broken because of slavery’s impact, in England the orthodox religious views prevalent

in late-seventeenth-century society do the same. It is another form of slavery, in other words, since the conformist is not able to think outside of his or her religious boundaries. It can be said that the dominant beliefs, representing extreme polarization in matters of religion, current in England at that time echo the destructive patterns of racial hierarchy in slavery.

Indeed, the mother's earlier warning against heathens perhaps plants the seed of enmity between Rebekka and Lina, something that grows when Jacob dies and Rebekka turns back to the church. Normally, when a mother and daughter bid goodbye, one expects the mother to wish her daughter a happy future, not to scare her with a frightening illusory image of the place to which her daughter is moving. The relationship between Rebekka and her mother is not close or nurturing since her mother is bound to the oppressive beliefs of her society more than sharing love with her daughter. Rebekka is never able to build a family, as all her children die at a young age, but she does first show the affection toward them of which she herself has been deprived.

Years later, when Rebekka imagines how her mother must look now, she asks 'Would the sharp pale eyes still radiate the shrewdness, the suspicion, Rebekka hated?' (*AM*, p. 93). This image reflects the suspicion that shaped their lives. There is no trace of love in their relationship and unfortunately Rebekka reverts to the malicious teachings of her parents at the end of the story, so ruining her other bonds. After Jacob's death, succumbing to the extremist views of her parents destroys the major remaining relationship in her life with Lina, and consequently she becomes more lonely and powerless. What is unique about Morrison's depiction is that she juxtaposes the mother-daughter relationship in a repressive England of imposed religious ideas with the mother-daughter relationship in a black enslaved family in the New World. Florens and Rebekka both suffer from a lack of motherly affection since their

mothers are struggling with the rules that society imposes on them. The religious, patriarchal, and racially supremacist values in operation break any normal mother-daughter connection and affect the possibility of future female solidarity as well.

In both mother-daughter relationships depicted above, Lina plays an important role; this invites a closer study of Lina's character next. As already noted, one interesting feature about Lina is her resemblance to the character of L in *Love*. Both are mouthpieces of wisdom in these works, although they both also have some shortcomings. They are both indifferent but perceptive observers of what is happening around them, and they both come to help other characters when it is needed. For instance, when Jacob is building his third house, every one shares the joy, yet Lina sees what is happening beyond this incident:

Lina was unimpressed by the festive mood, the jittery satisfaction of everyone involved [...] Mistress couldn't keep a smile off her face. Like everyone else, Willard, Scully, hired help, deliverymen, she was happy, cooking as though it were harvest time. Stupid Sorrow gapping with pleasure; the smithy laughing; Florens mindless as fern in wind. And Sir — she had never seen him in better spirit (*AM*, p. 42).

As indicated above, Lina acts as an impartial or even critical observer who sees the futility in their happiness, and predicts the downfall and division to come. She considers Jacob's act of removing hundreds of trees for the sake of his selfish ambition and conspicuous consumption as a self-destructive deed, a prophesy which later on turns out to be true.

Lina has survived smallpox, which almost destroyed her village, and her family has all died during her childhood. She was taken away to live with a family who accepted her as a



servant. Later on, the reader comes to know more about Lina's early heterosexual affair from Florens. We learn that she has been beaten up, raped, and thrown away by her lover, and from that time on the Presbyterian family who adopted her 'no longer let her inside their house so for weeks she sleeps where she can and eats from the bowl they leave for her on the porch' (*AM*, p. 103). As Lina herself says, they treated her like an animal, placing all the sin on her, and they put her up for sale. Jacob buys Lina and brings her to work on his farm, but before then, Lina takes her revenge on her undisclosed European man: 'she slips away and breaks the necks of two roosters and places a head in each of her lover's shoes. Every step he takes from then on will bring him closer to perpetual ruin' (*AM*, p. 103). This act portrays Lina's defiance and bravery against what her exploitative lover has done to her, perhaps drawing on Native beliefs and practices to reaffirm her own agency. Lina understands her status as a servant, but at the same time she takes her own action against the injustice. If the roosters are taken as symbols of manhood, she tries to show her former lover that female power can combat that of men who misuse their privilege. Having undergone such an abusive experience, she struggles to keep Florens away from the blacksmith, who is a free man and therefore in a more privileged position than the girl.

Lina fears that a free black man could be dangerous for Florens since he is eligible to do whatever he likes and is proud. The blacksmith can be likened to Jacob in some ways, as Jacob is independent and free to do anything with his wealth. In the early seventeenth century, when slavery was not established properly yet, a free black man still had some power and this scares Lina. Unfortunately, Florens does not pay any attention to Lina's warning and follows her heart blindly, meaning that at the end she encounters the consequences of investing all in the heterosexual bond and in a man who ultimately dismisses her.

When she finds the blacksmith, he introduces her to Maalik, a foundling child of a stranger who he has adopted. When Florens tells him about Rebekka's illness, he leaves Maalik with Florens and heads off back to Jacob's farm. When Florens accidentally injures Maalik, the blacksmith is swift to condemn her and calls her 'wild'. He pours out all his anger on her and sends her back home broken-hearted. Perceiving her as lacking self-control, Florens stands for what the blacksmith is afraid to be regarded as by the dominant society. If he was not a free man, he could be living a dependent life like Florens and that is the anger and fear that he projects onto Florens. Florens, who has so far been sheltered from the outside world, comes to a better understanding of the New World society that surrounds her, including both patriarchal male judgment and racism.

Her first encounter with cruelty on her journey is the reaction she receives from the Puritan villagers, when she is examined like an animal because of her different skin colour to figure out if she is a human being. The final wound is caused by her free lover, who rejects her like the rest of the contemporary society:

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too (*AM*, p. 139).

Slavery and its definitions take both Florens's mother and her lover away, and what she comes to know at the end is the real place she has as female and black in society. This

journey to experience self-recognition is 'A Mercy' bestowed upon her, meaning that she gains proper understanding of her surroundings and finally starts to shape her own defiant sense of self. She perhaps realises that in this harsh world she could have paid more attention to the care and devotion Lina gives her. She has instead broken her female bond to pursue an unequal heterosexual relationship, and in the end it is again a woman, her surrogate mother, who gives her solace.

Throughout, Lina acts as a helpful, powerful, and, at the same time, very humble character. Even when she is first brought to Jacob's farm, it is she who teaches Jacob how to farm. She helps Rebekka repeatedly, as mentioned before, and she is a caring mother figure for Florens. Lina acts as a carer and companion for both Florens and Rebekka. Although she herself does not properly remember the time she spent with her family in childhood, she establishes a full motherly relationship with Florens and a nurturing friendship with Rebekka. As a powerful woman who connects all the female characters at Jacob's house together, Lina acts as a centre in the community and the narrative, commenting on everyone's choices and deeds. She cares a lot about Florens, warns her against what will happen if she abandons everything for the blacksmith, and even after their rift takes care of the younger woman.

The only positive blood mother-daughter relationship, which is depicted late in the novel, is the connection between Sorrow and her new-born baby. Sorrow is the survivor of a shipwreck, an orphan taken in by a family until she is impregnated by one of their sons. Traded by them, she is brought to Jacob's to work and live. As a self-contained, odd, reckless girl who does not pay much heed to others, she arouses ambivalence and sometimes hostility in the other women. Despite this, they all help her when she becomes sick, taking turns to nurse her. Morrison depicts her life as changing entirely when she becomes a mother. When

in labour for the first time, it is Lina who helps her with a premature delivery. During her second pregnancy, Willard and Scully, local workers, help her in giving birth to her child, yet she thinks ‘although all her life she had been saved by men [...] she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important by herself’ (AM, p. 131). After this accomplishment, and with the building of a new maternal bond, she changes into a different person: ‘now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs, impervious to the complaints of others’ (AM, p. 132). She becomes more organized and independent, and powerful as well. She regards her baby as her achievement: “I am your mother,” she said. “My name is Complete”” (AM, p. 132). As she perceives, she is more complete now, taking care of another person and fulfilling her duties as a caring mother. Through these motherly affections, Sorrow is the one woman in *A Mercy* who shifts from relying on an attachment to male authority to feminine power found in search of completeness. She comes to know that what her own self-defined gender and mothering role gives her is a more rewarding constant than anything experienced by her before. This mother-daughter relationship is a form of female homosociality which flourishes, and the author suggests it as a form of female redemption at the end.

Interestingly, Sorrow’s sense of completeness through her experience of motherhood echoes Sethe’s pride about saving her babies from slavery in *Beloved*:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out

and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it.<sup>72</sup>

Sethe regards her escape from Sweet Home and getting her children to Baby Suggs's home in Ohio as an achievement which only a mother can fulfill, enduring hardship for the sake of the family she created. The repetition of 'I' indicates a sense of accomplishment, selfhood and pride specifically in this action that she owns all by herself. Her self-led escape gives her an identity and makes her existence felt, something paralleled by Sorrow's transformation on becoming a mother responsible for another.

In *A Mercy*, the community living on Jacob Vaark's farm represents a kind of extended multi-racial family. In this family, every member has a distinctive individual life story and is brought to this New World home through previous acts of rejection or encounters with loss and dramatic events. Secluded in the middle of nowhere, the female characters especially establish a union in order to survive and to combat isolation. Among these relationships, the connection among women has provided a rich focus for this section of my chapter. As mentioned above, the sisterly connection between Lina and Rebekka ends in hostility on Rebekka's side, whereas Lina still stays faithful and committed to her mistress. Lina acts as another mother for Florens and tries her best to keep her away from the stratified society in the outside world, which has rejected and harassed Lina as a Native servant. Rebekka, who is brought to America to enter a pre-arranged marriage with Jacob, loses her self-definition and security after Jacob's death and obsessively seeks out religion, which brings her self-destruction. Sorrow, who is more distant from the women of the household, is a captain's daughter who is the only survivor of a shipwreck. She lacks sense but discovers a

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<sup>72</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), p. 162.

new-found capability after her successful child delivery. She finds her self-definition in her mother-daughter relationship with her baby daughter. And finally Florens, who sets off on a journey to find the blacksmith and eventually herself, is a black slave girl who has been given to Jacob for her master's debt. At the end of the novel, an epiphany about her situation as a black girl in a harsh wider society occurs for her and she reaches self-knowledge after her formative travels.

The connections between these women can be classified as female friendships and mother-daughter relationships, both biological and non-biological. All these women from different backgrounds shape a mixed community on Jacob's farm, and each of them builds a part of the narrative whole through adding their own life story. The domestic relationship they establish is based on their connection to Jacob, after whose death disturbance comes to the farm where they live. Each of them is then separated and secluded in her own world. Rebekka retreats back to religion, whereas Sorrow spends most of her time with her baby. Florens is preoccupied with her new self-discovery, while Lina remains the same but is alone this time. The bonds based on their relationship to a man shatter or are strained after the male character is removed from the story and through this loss Morrison reveals the value of their union. It was shared female community that made learning and growth as strong, capable women possible. If Rebekka understood that even without Jacob the bond between her and Lina could make them powerful and self-reliant, she might not have looked for an alternative support in the church. They together learnt to manage the farm and the house during Jacob's absences, so why does Rebekka become insecure after Jacob's death? Morrison's narrative prompts us to speculate on what might have happened if they had stayed united and enjoyed the benefits of female homosociality, and whether they might not then have been doomed to isolation.

Had Florens listened to the voice of experience of Lina and stayed home, she might not have suffered in her relation with the blacksmith; yet, at the same time, that difficult journey brings self-recognition and new strength. In her conclusion Morrison suggests that if the women had valued themselves and stayed invested in solidarity they need not have feared a world in which being a woman is regarded as a liability. A further central part of the scheme of *A Mercy* is the scarring impact of slavery on Florens and her family relationships. Slavery takes her mother away and prevents her from enjoying proper mother-daughter closeness. The invidious racial institution also interferes with her later heterosexual union, since her free partner is ashamed of her being or acting like a slave. Such damage will be taken up further in my reading of *Beloved*.

Morrison's depiction of homosociality in this novel is informed by the distinct historical setting and era. Set in the 1690s, at a time of migration from Europe and also Middle Passages from Africa, the choice of a moment of upheaval and the early growth of slavery in America for *A Mercy* provides a dynamic context for the author's posing of questions through fiction. Morrison explores how female connections are influenced by the social rules and the beliefs of the era. The bondage of many of the women and their ownership by Jacob is significant. Although Jacob is not shown to be controlling or abusive like Bill Cosey, he is depicted as a propertied man who can trade women for money or goods; he buys Rebekka from her parents, takes Florens as a form of exchange in reimbursement of a debt, and purchases Lina as a servant. Still, while he is alive, the female connections in his household are sustained and supportive. When he dies, Rebekka feels the need to be connected to the local community in order to ensure she can keep Jacob's land. As the norms of the wider seventeenth-century society, including strict religion and patriarchal property

rights, are brought into the house by Rebekka, so female connections weaken. Contemporary racial hierarchies become apparent in the different treatment of Lina, and the disruption of homosocial bonding signals mixed prospects of loneliness, self-knowledge and, in Sorrow's case, mothering care. At the same time, comparing Morrison's works, one can infer that even in different locations and eras there are similarities between her notions of female connection and mutual support and, indeed, the obstacles that impede their flourishing. Now I will turn to examine the same issues in *Beloved*, exploring their parallel development in the earlier novel.

### **Fragmented Female Bonding in *Beloved***

124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims (*B*, p. 2).

Morrison's masterpiece, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988, starts with a warning to the reader. Considering the date, 1873, the reader is prompted to expect to learn about the dark history of slavery as a formative background and, given the mention of women and children in the opening lines, especially perhaps its impact on the mother-daughter relationship. The first line tells of a powerful baby and foreshadows the revenge of *Beloved* which is unravelled later. The narrator puts emphasis on 'the women in the house' to show how they are going to be affected, and singles out Sethe and her daughter Denver to hint at the impact on the female familial bond. In the remaining discussion, my main focus will be on the similarities found between the two novels looked at in this chapter and how Morrison probes the same issues in both. *A Mercy* was written by Morrison twenty years after



*Beloved*, but both texts still have in common the question: how does slavery influence female homosociality, and how did women respond through their bonding during and after the era of slavery?

In writing *Beloved* Morrison was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, who killed her two-year-old daughter in a shocking act of defence against her being taken back into slavery.<sup>73</sup> This notorious event provides the base ground for Morrison to build up the story of *Beloved*. Sethe plays the role of Margaret Garner and invites dual responses to her action of sacrificing her daughter in order to protect her from the brutality of slavery. Throughout the novel, the reader sympathises with Sethe, who has survived difficult times, and the unimaginable brutality which she suffered during slavery reinforces the motivation for her act. Yet, at the same time, killing one's own child seems a terrible choice and readers may share with some of the novel's characters a judgment that it is unacceptable, no matter what the circumstances. Sethe herself suffers greatly after the incident, and when she again encounters Beloved, she tries her best to convince her about the rightness of her terrible decision or at least her intention.

The mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and Beloved forms the main core of the novel, but there are also other examples of female bonding which invite further attention, such as the relationship between Sethe and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and the connection between her and her other daughter, Denver. The community of women who help the family at the end also prompt consideration in terms of homosociality. As in Morrison's

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<sup>73</sup> The story of Margaret Garner can be found in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 60–63; Morrison, as quoted in Gloria Naylor, 'A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison', in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, Mississippi, 1994) p. 206, p. 208; and Gurleen Grewal, 'Memory and the Matrix of History: The Poetics of Loss and Recovery in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in Amritjit Singh et al. (eds), *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literature* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1996), pp. 140- 74; p.156.

ninth novel, *A Mercy*, female connections in *Beloved* are shaped and damaged by the institution of slavery, thus my examination will take up how such connections are formed and disturbed by the social classifications and structures of the era.

As Barbara Schapiro writes in *The Bonds Of Love*:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* penetrates, perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery. The novel reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one's status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual's internal world. These internal resonances are so profound that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the self will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom.<sup>74</sup>

The above argument focuses on two pivotal ideas: first, how slavery can deny one's human status through negative definitions and restrictions from the outside, and secondly how the impact of slavery can last, still ruining one's inner self-respect and limiting freedom even when the external force has disappeared. Years after the abolition of slavery, Sethe still tries to divorce her self and family from the wider society in order to protect her children from the damage which it could bring to them. Still Sethe is enslaved to her past and the intolerable events which happened to her. This can be paralleled with the terrible decision of Florens's mother to give up her daughter to save her, perceived as a rejection, which then leaves Florens with a damaged sense of their bond and her self-worth.

Later, Schapiro continues:

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<sup>74</sup> Barbara Schapiro, 'The Bonds and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *Contemporary Literature*, 36/2 (1991), 194-210, p. 194.

*Beloved* explores the interpersonal and intrapsychic effects of growing up as a black person in such a system, one in which intersubjectivity is impossible [...] the mother is made incapable of recognizing the child, and the child cannot recognize the mother. As a young girl, Sethe had to have her mother 'pointed out' to her by another child. When she becomes a mother herself, she is so deprived and depleted that she cannot satisfy the hunger for recognition, the longed for 'look', that both her daughters crave (196-97).

Schapiro explores the unavoidable damaging effects of estrangement which slavery imposes on the mother-daughter relationship. In this case, both Sethe as a mother and Sethe as a daughter suffer, since she was confined to life as a female black slave. From this we can draw out that Sethe cannot play the role of an ideal mother for her daughters since she had no real contact with a mother herself. The fragmented mother-daughter relationship, shared by her fellow slaves and ex-slaves, is imposed by an external force which they can never entirely escape. As they have been misused as objects, dehumanized and trapped by slavery, they struggle to act as subjects.

As the reader learns from Baby Suggs's inner thoughts:

Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized (*B*, p. 23).

The narrator reveals the pains Baby Suggs has to suffer as a black mother. Her eight children have six fathers, and her two daughters are sold away when they are still very young and she does not even have the chance to say goodbye to them. She has to answer to the sexual desires of a white man in order to keep her third child, who eventually is taken away from her as well. She in part soothes herself by saying that God has taken away her children, and then Halle comes into her life and buys her freedom by renting his labour out at weekends, yet by then her freedom 'didn't mean a thing' (*B*, p. 23). Through the life story of Baby Suggs as a black mother, Morrison paints a chilling picture of the hierarchical wider society which forms the backdrop for the rest of the plot. She shows how a black mother suffered from the loss of her children when they were sold as commodities, without her permission, let alone letting her say farewell. Such depictions of familial separation and destruction have grave implications for the possibility of affirmative female bonding. What Baby Suggs has gone through is representative of slave mothering experience in the nineteenth century. Although eventually she is freed, the freedom means nothing since the damage done to her lives on in her psyche.

Sethe offers another example of a mother's suffering as the effects of the brutality she endures lead her to kill her child in order to protect her. In the opening pages of the novel, when Paul D comes back to find Sethe after almost twenty years, Sethe indirectly tells him about the painful memory she still bears and the one which made her make up her mind to protect her children at any price:

"I had milk," she said. "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar [...]. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was

going to nurse her like me [...] nobody had her milk but me [...] the milk would be there and I would be there with it” (*B*, p. 16).

Later, Sethe tells Paul D how she was violently deprived of the milk she was carrying for her baby girl. At Sweet Home schoolteacher’s boys came and took her milk away, and the trauma is so devastating that she still cannot overcome it. She even reports it to her mistress Mrs. Garner, but she can do nothing for her. When Paul D is exclaiming in indignation about how they flogged her even when she was heavily pregnant, she only puts emphasis on the value that the milk had for her.

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (*B*, p. 17).

Her milk stands for her sense of motherhood and the care she wanted to bestow upon her baby girl. Although she has gone through other damaging incidents before, this one shatters her the most. The milk is the connection between her and her baby girl. Taking her milk away violates her identity as a mother and the mother-daughter relationship she tries to establish. Not only does mother’s milk connect the mother to her baby, but also it symbolically transfers identity and culture. In this sense, Sethe failed to pass on her culture and family heritage to her baby girl and this experience shatters her. Milk is more than a substance here; we can interpret it as linked to identity construction and the legacy of homosocial nurturing, which the white society prevents Sethe from bestowing upon her child. The relationship

between Sethe and her daughter is fractured from this point and their bond is violated. After this incident, Sethe is so devastated that she murders her own daughter in order to keep her from living an unbearable life, like her. I should add here that, Paul D is one of Morrison's male characters who undergoes a moderate change at the end and sympathizes with Sethe's suffering. Morrison depicts a spectrum of male figures that are not equally patriarchal and Paul D is a black male character who comes to an understanding of women's pain by the end of the novel.

There is an echo of this dynamic in *A Mercy* when Florens's mother recognises the developing sexual attraction of the master and mistress towards her young daughter and she tries to warn her of the danger. Having herself been the victim of their sexual exploitation, her fears for Florens are desperate: 'a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye' (*AM*, p. 164). Florens's mother sees her wearing of the mistress's castoff shoes as foreshadowing premature maturity and the destructive impact of sexual abuse. She urges Jacob to buy Florens, hoping that the new master will not be as cruel as her own.

Returning to *Beloved*, Kathleen Mark points out

Sethe's ultimate act of killing her child in order to save it from a life of slavery is in part a pressured response to this first thwarted act [of nursing] wherein she is kept from protecting the child. From this violation of self, Sethe develops a venomous defense [...] that becomes both her doom and her salvation throughout the novel. Her future actions ought to be seen in this light.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Kathleen Mark, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2002), pp. 31-32.

As Mark argues, whatever Sethe later does, including her act of killing her child, should be interpreted bearing in mind the ugly fact that she has been deprived of being a mother in the first place. When her milk was taken away, she was prevented from sustaining her child's life, something which makes her more determined to fiercely protect her child at any cost. She kills her daughter to save her, and also to prove that she owns her because of her mothering relationship. This echoes the separation of Florens from her mother and the ruined mother-daughter relationship between them, which continues to haunt Florens's later life.

Paula Gallant Eckard investigates blood and its manifestation in Morrison's fiction in relation to the female body. She writes that

disruption of the natural rhythms of the female body parallels Morrison's portrayal of the confusion and disruption that slavery imposes on human lives [...]. The first blood mystery of menstruation is found in *Beloved* in the twenty-eight days of unslaved life that Sethe has with her children at the house on Bluestone Road. The twenty-eight days correspond to the lunar cycle, but they are also representative of the menstrual cycle.<sup>76</sup>

In her study, Eckard examines how the writer portrays the effects of slavery by bringing a fragmented cycle of women's blood into the story. While Morrison introduces menstruation in *The Bluest Eye* and the blood of birthing in *Sula*, according to Eckard, the interrupted rhythm and cycle in *Beloved* indicates and reflects the chaotic situation of the women and their fractured, estranged identity in slave and post-slavery society. Broadly reinforcing this argument, Andrea O'Reilly writes:

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<sup>76</sup> Paula Gallant Eckard, *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2002), p. 66.

Cut off from her motherline, Sethe is unsure how to mother. Sethe also realizes that mothers bequeath more than practical advice to their daughters. In loving her daughter, the mother enables the daughter to love when she herself becomes a mother; motherlove fosters self-love. Mothering is thus essential for the emotional well-being of children. To be a loving mother, a woman must first be loved as a daughter (88).

O'Reilly argues that since Sethe is separated from her birth mother in the early stages of childhood and she is deprived of mother love eventually, she is unable to pass the motherly affection on to her own child. Also, in this way, she is unable to teach her daughters self-love which she has never experienced herself. Her argument about the self-love, which is a consequence of mother-love, seems true in the case of Sethe and Denver but breakdown in the example of Sethe and Beloved. Sethe never intends to kill Beloved on the basis that she does not know how to love her children, but quite the contrary; she kills her in her utmost act of mother love in order to protect her.

The critical perspectives interwoven with my discussion of *Beloved* above all explore different aspects of mother-daughter relationships and the destructive impact of slavery on this connection. As we have seen, Morrison uses the case of Sethe, but also others like Baby Suggs, to reveal the lasting, internalised and haunting consequences of slavery's violation of the formation of the primary bond between a mother and her child. For good reason, the interaction between Sethe and Beloved has been much explored in previous studies. I will next turn to examining wider circles of women and a variety of bonds between them in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, considering female homosociality in both positive and negative forms.



### **Multi-Racial Circles of Women in *Beloved* and *A Mercy***

In both novels looked at in this chapter, although Morrison foregrounds the divisive structures and legacies of slavery, there are close connections among women which go beyond race or class difference. We can identify significant examples of female homosociality which are cross-racial in the two narratives, as the writer works to depict female relationships overcoming gulfs caused by slavery and social background. Although the fragmented mother-daughter relationship is a stark victim of slavery in Morrison's works, there are also other types of female bonding which are posed as potentially compensating for the loss.

For example, the connection between Lina and Rebekka for a long time transcends their different origins, as well as the bonding in passing between Florens and Daughter Jane, who mutually help each other without consideration of skin colour. In addition, the circle of women at 124 Bluestone Road and their solidarity resemble the mixed household of women in *A Mercy*. When *Beloved* returns, Sethe and Denver welcome a stranger into their home and informally adopt her; likewise, in *A Mercy*, Florens is accepted and Sorrow is taken in to form a composite household. In both novels, women create a form of solidarity of their own, and help and care for each other often in sites secluded from the rest of society, anticipating an aspect of *Paradise*. While Sethe showers her motherly care on *Beloved* before knowing that she is the incarnation of her dead baby, Lina cares for the unrelated Florens as if she was the child she never had. Although she is not a mother, her maternal affections help her to establish an alternative mother-daughter relationship with Florens to compensate for the lack. The non-blood mother-daughter relationship between them helps them both to enjoy female

homosociality in a positive and sustaining way. The extreme devotion of Lina and Sethe is similar, and they both lose their adopted children in the end. In both novels, the destructive forces of slavery, patriarchy, colonialism and/or dominant classifications of race cannot be escaped from entirely or forever.

In *A Mercy* Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane welcome Florens without considering the fact that she is black and a slave. In a small Puritan village where their neighbours regard Florens as evil, this mother and daughter see her as a helpless human being lost on her journey and not a threat or force of the devil. The mutual respect which develops among them transcends race and Florens is treated equally by them. They both help Florens in continuing her journey to the blacksmith — or rather to self-recognition — without considering her physical difference of skin colour. This can be paralleled with the episode when Amy Denver, a white girl, helps escaped slave Sethe to give birth to Denver in *Beloved*.

On her journey to find the blacksmith, after days of sleeping in the woods, Florens comes upon the home of a widow and her daughter on the edge of a Puritan village. She seeks help from them and they shelter and feed her. Things go well until other villagers discover Florens. They are already suspicious of Daughter Jane, who has an eye disorder that the villagers regard as a mark of evil. They consider the poor girl a witch, and her mother has whipped her legs to force them to bleed and show that her daughter is not enchanted. When they see Florens, they forget Daughter Jane, believing the stranger brings a bad omen and scolding the Widow for letting her in her house. Florens's blackness is so unnatural to them that they start checking her body parts to see whether she is a human being or not. This represents a harming sense of 'othering' for Florens.

The next day, in secret, Daughter Jane prepares food for Florens, lends her a blanket and shows her the way to find the blacksmith. Since she is herself seen as a demon by the villagers, sympathizes with Florens and tries to help her. Indeed, she understands her situation as outsider better than anyone else. As Florens recounts: 'I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead and watches as I step down into the stream's dry bed' (*AM*, p. 112). The bonding between them leads to mutual help and support. Daughter Jane is relieved that at least for a limited time the villagers have been distracted by Florens and do not persecute her. Florens benefits from this cross-racial connection as well, since her life is literally saved by Daughter Jane. Had she not been there for Florens, no one could surmise what would have happened to her, being entrapped among people who regard her as alien and evil. Although her journey is meant to find a man whom Florens regards as her saviour, it is female bonding which helps her to go on and complete her path to self-discovery. One of the greatest helps that she receives on this journey is from Daughter Jane and her mother, who welcome her into their house without questioning her common humanity. They, and especially Jane, have been ostracised from society and thus they empathise with the isolated Florens and do all they can to help at some risk to themselves. Meanwhile, the reaction of the villagers portrays the dominant opinion in a racially stratified seventeenth-century society. They are revealed as not only racist but also intolerant towards anyone with a physical abnormality like Daughter Jane. Despite such discrimination, Daughter Jane and her mother do not lose their empathy and they support the helpless Florens without following the community's path of distrust and hatred. This female bonding is highlighted by the writer as being forged against and in spite

of a background of social rift, violence, exclusion, and a struggle for survival in a volatile New World.

Although the household in *A Mercy* is headed by a man, we see that in fact it is the women who run it and Jacob is mostly absent throughout the story. In *Beloved*, the household belongs to Baby Suggs, who is dead by the narrative present, yet her memories remain and are retold by those who have enjoyed her generous heart. One of her most significant roles is helping Sethe to overcome the dreadful physical and emotional harm she endured at Sweet Home. During the critical twenty-eight-day period, in which Sethe lived the ‘unslaved life’ after she ran away, Baby Suggs gave her shelter and healing to allow her to return to ordinary existence: ‘Baby Suggs’ long-distance love was equal to any skin-close love she had known’ (*B*, p. 95). Although there is no biological mother-daughter relationship between Baby Suggs and Sethe, Sethe here feels the comfort and relief that a mother can bestow upon her. Baby Suggs welcomes a wide range of women into her household and Sethe is surrounded by their affection as well: ‘one taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day’ (*B*, p. 95). It is partly such female homosociality which helps Sethe recover from past memories, at least for a short period before she is found by schoolteacher.

Not only Sethe, but also the other women of the community, enjoy the generosity of Baby Suggs, who gathers them together. Later in the novel, when they come back to 124 to pray for Sethe, they remember the old days that they spent with Baby Suggs:

When they caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver [...] but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep. Catfish was popping grease in the pan and they saw

themselves scoop German potato salad onto the plates [...]. They sat on the porch, ran down to the creek, teased the men [...] Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more [...]. The fence they had leaned on and climbed over was gone. The stump of the butternut had split like a fan. But there they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs' yard (*B*, p. 258).

Although these women are coming back to 124 after years of distance, still they have good memories of Baby Suggs's house and how they were once free and happy there. In a short paragraph, twice the narrator emphasises their happiness and how they felt stronger in the female homosociality that Baby Suggs fosters for them. The circle of women that Baby Suggs creates, and the connections she establishes are beyond any differences between them and, indeed, this is part of the reason they later return to try to help with the desperate plight of Sethe.

In both novels, Morrison explores the impact of the dominant society and slavery in particular, yet at the same time in some ways deliberately disentangles a pattern of female homosociality that goes on in spite of this. In their woodland encounter during her escape from Sweet Home, as soon as Sethe finds out that Amy Denver is a girl, she is relieved. In Sethe's case, men are mostly regarded as threats, thus finding out that a girl has found her gives her reassurance, for she feared a white boy at first. She also knows that for a woman in labour another woman is more helpful: 'the lean-to was full of leaves, which Amy pushed into a pile for Sethe to lie on' (*B*, p. 34). The vagrant white girl kindly massages Sethe's swollen legs and 'then she did the magic', easing her pain (*B*, p. 35). When Sethe gets married to Halle and sadly finds that there will be no ceremony, Mrs. Garner, her white mistress, gives her a wedding gift to assuage the disappointment (*B*, pp. 59-60). Again, in this

case, a fellow woman has greater understanding of how Sethe feels at being denied a wedding and tries to help her to overcome the devaluation. Although Mrs. Garner is white, her caring attitude toward Sethe in part reaches across the division along lines of race of the time. Again, Sethe enjoys some female homosociality, where a woman-woman relationship is temporarily primary in a generally hostile context. Although mother-daughter relationships are under the destructive impression of the social background of slavery in both novels, other types of female bonding are shown to be at work to compensate and we can conclude Morrison sees worth in them regardless of the time and place.

Morrison also uses the symbolic element of water to develop her portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship and its failure in *Beloved*. When Beloved comes back, she walks ‘out of the water’ (*B*, p. 50), and as soon as Sethe sees Beloved’s face, ‘her bladder filled to capacity’ (*B*, p.51). This incident, which resembles the breaking of waters in pregnancy, is connected quickly to the incident in which Sethe was introduced to her own mother: ‘Not since she was a baby girl, being cared for by the eight-year-old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable’ (*B*, p. 51). Water symbolism thus connects the various mother-daughter relationships in the novel, and Morrison deploys recurrent imagery to emphasise the connection. The symbolic invocation of water perhaps highlights the decimation of bonding time by slavery in reality. Such water imagery reinforces the importance of a relationship which is forced to be secondary.

Similarly, in *A Mercy*, the element of water is often there in the background when Morrison focuses on female bonding. Rebekka and her shipmates take a long journey together across the Atlantic to the Promised Land of America, and their friendship is influential for Rebekka’s outlook afterwards. Rebekka and Lina bathe in the river as friends before

Rebekka's bereavement and transformation. Finally Sorrow gives birth to her daughter near the river (echoing Sethe with Denver) and after her delivery she gains a new identity by experiencing a full, positive mother-daughter relationship. I suggest that the recurrent image of water alongside female bonding in both novels reinforces the connection between the two, usually in a positive manner. Paying attention to water can help us to perceive yet more instances of Morrison drawing out generative relations and encounters between women, sometimes across the boundaries of race. As critical readings of *Beloved* have tended to dwell on the relationship between Sethe and Beloved, to conclude the chapter I will turn to the relationship between Sethe and Denver as equally revealing for the concern of female homosociality.

### **A Neglected Mother-Daughter Bond**

Denver's introduction in the novel invites a closer study: 'DENVER'S SECRETS were sweet' (*B*, p. 28). The first line of a chapter focused on her suggests Denver's loneliness that involves secrets and no one to share them with. As the reader comes to know later, Sethe tries to seclude her only remaining child, Denver, from the wider society of Reconstruction Cincinnati in order to protect her. By this, she not only kills the little girl's ambitions and self-confidence, but also, unintentionally, she pushes her into a later sudden revolt. In the first paragraph, through an interior perspective, the writer reveals the tree house in which Denver spends her time and how the loneliness shapes her introversion from childhood into adulthood: 'it began as a little girl's houseplay, but as her desires changed, so did the play. Quiet, primate and completely secret' (*B*, p. 28). Later, the writer adds 'In that bower, closed

off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out*' (*B*, pp. 28-29). As the narrator points out, Denver seeks shelter from the outside world, which she has been taught by her mother is dangerous. She thus comes to see all contact with the outside as a threat to the secluded arena in which she learns about herself and her desires as she grows up. She discovers the thrill of cologne on her naked skin in her own private den, and she enters the world of adult longing in her own private space.

The bower is so tiny that Denver needs to crawl and bow into it, and it resembles a mother's womb, where the child spends a critical nine months before entering into the world. This connection is reinforced, since when she exits the boxwood, she remembers the image her mother drew her of her birth: 'a thin and whipping snow very like the picture her mother had painted as she described the circumstances of Denver's birth in a canoe straddled by a white girl for whom she was named' (*B*, p. 29). The tree house plays an important substitute role in Denver's life, shaping her development just as a mother's womb does for a baby. We might say it acts as an extended version of Sethe's womb for Denver, who still needs to grow before entering the real world: 'Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish' (*B*, p. 29). The tree house also promises her future salvation and freedom from the fear her mother puts in her head. Denver finds her own way at the end of the novel, and with the help of Baby Suggs's ghost is able enter the society of which she has been always afraid.

Significantly the only vivid, positive connection Denver establishes with her mother is around the story of her birth. Denver enjoys her mother's telling of that story since she feels this is the only one which is all about her and places her in the centre of her mother's



attention. Repeatedly, she asks Sethe to tell her the story and she feels thrilled and comforted by listening to it. When Sethe fled Sweet Home, she was pregnant with Denver. As already discussed, on her way she meets a white girl who is heading to Boston and helps Sethe in her labour. The homosocial solidarity between Sethe and Amy — the white girl — results in bringing Denver into the world safe and sound, and Denver enjoys listening to the story of the incident since she yearns for such company and bonding herself. She is deprived of any constant female connection in her own household since her mother is so busy caring for and appeasing Beloved, and her dead sister cares for no one other than her mother. This perceived rejection offers a parallel to Florens's perception about her mother. For years, she thinks that her mother has preferred her other child over her. After Baby Suggs's death, Denver is left alone and secluded from female homosociality at home, and she enjoys the story in which another woman came to help her come into the world; this can be seen to prefigure how eventually her grandmother and the teacher Lady Jones help her to widen her circle of female allies.

Finally it is Baby Suggs — or maybe her ghost — who motivates Denver to step out of the isolated world of childhood and face the outside world: “know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (*B*, p. 244). Faced with the household's starvation, Denver seeks help from Lady Jones, and although she is unable to offer her any paid work, she encourages the community to assist the family with food. Denver subsequently receives food gifts from local women and goes back to the benefactors to say thank you. This act helps Denver to widen her world and enter into a richer, greater range of female bonding. As her relationship with her own mother and sister deteriorates at home, her connections with the community of women in the outside world of black Cincinnati improves. Finally, Denver succeeds in stepping out of

her comfort zone and experiences the world from a new perspective. While the mother-daughter relationship is stifling and then breaks down for Denver, she is still enabled by her female connections. Her grandmother helps her to help herself and her family, and the community welcome her with open arms to show her that there is still kindness, support, and fellow feeling among women. The character of Denver is much more mature and developed by the end of *Beloved*, and the child who crawls into a tiny space of retreat and isolation turns into a strong young girl who is making plans to go away to college.

The mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and Denver, which is pushed to the periphery of the plot, might none the less be seen as revealing, especially from the angle of Denver's experience. The relationship between Sethe and Beloved, who came back from the world of death, cannot be regarded as the only mother-daughter bond for analysis while an equally significant one is ignored. While Denver yearns for female company, solidarity, and a 'normal' mother-daughter relationship, her mother's mind is busy with the dead child. She is passed over and neglected for a lost sister and her presence is even less appreciated when the ghost comes back. Even at the end, it is Denver who saves her mother and not the other way around when it should be her mother who protects her: 'Since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring (Sethe happy when Beloved was; Beloved lapping devotion like cream), Denver knew it was on her' (*B*, p. 243). All her devotion to, and care for, her mother and sister is futile, since they only consider their own relationship as the primary one. Only through a wider, non-familial circle of women does a nurturing relation and a future of belonging open up for Denver.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Morrison portrays both positive and negative forms of female homosociality in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. For instance, Sethe's motherly affections endanger her own life and put her only existing daughter's life at risk as well. Her devotion to Beloved depletes and distracts her and her sense of protection keeps Denver away from the outer world. But at the same time, other forms of female bonding help women to grow and be happier and stronger. The connection between Denver and the women of the community encourages her to come out from 124 and engage with society in an enhancing way. The longstanding bond between Baby Suggs and the women of the community is nurturing, and the lessons about self-love which Baby Suggs teaches them guide them through life. Likewise, in *A Mercy* for example, the friendship between Rebekka and Lina helps them to learn and cope with the harsh life on an isolated farm, and the intimate connection between Lina and Florens helps them both to compensate for the lack of a mother-daughter relationship. However, Morrison also shows Rebekka's later disregard for her old companion and friend, and a painful gulf in understanding between Florens and her mother regarding their separation.

Morrison keeps reminding the reader of the impact of slavery on women and their connections, but at the same time offers instances of positive female homosociality which are less governed by social divisions or hierarchies, for example that shared by Daughter Jane and Florens. She shows the devastating violation and fragmentation of mother-daughter relationships in the era of slavery, including infanticide, but simultaneously shapes other kinds of female bonding which are at work to soothe the pain. In *A Mercy* she turns to early New World settlement to explore the formation and solidifying of structures of inequality that can, and will continue to, damage family and other relations and women's independence and

sense of self worth. In *Beloved* we find the ongoing legacies of slavery including a violently supremacist society and the inner lives of African American individuals warped by it. Morrison's vision also encompasses a relationship between Rebekka and her mother that is impoverished by the religious extremes of seventeenth-century Puritan England as she develops a wide canvas of contexts in these historical novels, drawing out particularities, parallels and constants. The pressures of patriarchy and racial discrimination are again and again shown to operate negatively on black women's prospects, self understanding and ability to sustain reciprocal bonds. Yet *Beloved* ends with hope and community for Denver while *A Mercy's* mixed conclusion incorporates the self-knowledge of Florens and the motherly love and completeness of Sorrow.

These two novels centralise the damage done to primary mother-daughter relationships in particular by slavery, also showing how female homosociality can bring solace and recompense. My last chapter will turn to *Paradise*, in which Morrison depicts and highlights specifically the idea of collective female homosociality.

## Chapter Four

### Collective Female Bonding in *Paradise*: Reviving Hurt Women

#### Introduction

Toni Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*, published in 1997, encompasses a more recent period of time in African American history, approximately 1950-1976, than the historical fictions considered in Chapter Three. *Paradise*, which is the last novel in Morrison's trilogy, comes after *Beloved* and *Jazz* to extend their historical range and complete the development of a loose story arc.<sup>77</sup> The third person narrative wanders between Ruby, an insular black community, and the Convent, where women who have suffered similar injuries to self gather together. Ruby is a small town that is supposed to be heaven on the earth for its black inhabitants, but as Katrine Dalsgård points out

the novel culminates in a horrific massacre conducted by these [...] men on a group of unconventional women living in a place called the Convent. In this way Morrison suggests that the price of Ruby's insistence on maintaining a morally superior master narrative may well be the sacrifice of that very narrative. Rather than a perfect paradise, Ruby ends up as a conservative, patriarchal, thoroughly racialized, and violent community.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Widdowson, 'The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', *Journal of American Studies*, 35/2 (2001), 313-335, p. 314.

<sup>78</sup> Katrine Dalsgård, 'The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', *African American Review*, 35/2 (2001), 233-248, p. 233.

As Dalsgard outlines, Morrison's novel develops from the idea of a dream settlement, conceived at the end of the nineteenth century and revived in the mid-twentieth, to a stark critique of how the utopia that the Ruby residents struggled to create turns out. On the other side, the Convent evolves into a promising 'paradise' where women heal and share care and a positive all-female home.

In *Paradise* Morrison addresses female homosociality overtly, even self-reflexively, exploring a collective safe refuge from the wounds caused by patriarchy. She thus models the benefits of the company of female peers. Since this novel poses female homosociality as a pivotal theme, I will devote a whole chapter to it. Morrison's decision to name most of the novel chapters after female characters signals the significance of the women and their connections. The novel encompasses a variety of sub-plots which all reflect the difficulties which women face in a wider patriarchal society, and the ease and solace that they find in the homosociality pervading the space of the Convent. As I will explore, the Convent functions as a safe shelter for these wounded women and they also try to forge their own paradise by establishing female connections.

While *Paradise* is invested in examination of relations between women, this novel can be seen to present patriarchy in more explicit terms than some other Morrison works. It is worth noting that Morrison's body of fiction portrays a spectrum of male figures, placed differently in relation to a patriarchal order, and sometimes shows the damage done to black men themselves within a white patriarchal order. As mentioned earlier, Paul D in *Beloved* provides an example of complex and sympathetic masculinity. Susan Neal Mayberry in her book, *Can't I Love What I Criticize?*, explores this wide range of male figures in Toni

Morrison's novels up to the her seventh novel, *Paradise*. Commenting on *Paradise*, she writes:

Although a number of critics identify *Paradise* as Morrison's most antimale work, it consistently relies on bleak contrast to spotlight what masculine potential can be. Her novel [...] highlights a brightly, androgynously multicolored convent world against a dark backdrop provided by a seen black male presence and a less visible but paramount white male presence within Ruby. The negative male characters fall into opposing binary radicals, either extremely disrespectful to or overly protective toward females. Violating the cardinal rule of a hunter's hunter, they perceive women as prey or on pedestals.<sup>79</sup>

Mayberry acknowledges that many critics like Andrea O'Reilly,<sup>80</sup> for instance, categorize this novel as the most 'antimale work' but also she adds that Morrison draws out the influence of the wider white male dominated society on the hardening judgements and eventually violent reactions of the African American patriarchs of Ruby. We see patriarchy take different forms as some of the town's men disregard women while others over protect women. Although the narrator reveals at the beginning of *Paradise* that Ruby is a safe place for black women who can walk through the neighborhood at night without fear, I would like to add that even this kind of 'safety' and protection from white male threat arises out of patriarchal norms. By the end there is perhaps the beginning of a more positive model of male identity as explored

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<sup>79</sup> Susan Neal Mayberry, *Can't I Love What I Criticize? The Masculine and Morrison* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), p. 225.

<sup>80</sup> O'Reilly in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, argues that what damages and breaks up Ruby in the end are the patriarchal and misogynist ideas which are practiced by male Ruby residents, meaning they destroy their own home (p. 169).

through the different responses of the two Morgan brothers after the attack on the outside community of women at the Convent. Nonetheless the main focus on the ‘othering’ of one community by the male leaders of another contributes to the contrasts mentioned by Mayberry above and confirms an explicit engagement with the operation of patriarchy here. In my exploration of how female homosociality can restore women following the hurt done to them by a wider patriarchal society I do not share Mayberry’s view of the Convent as ‘androgenous’ and identify it as a female space of refuge.

When Billie Delia is guiding Pallas, a fragile and damaged girl, to the Convent she explains:

This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me. Nicer than — well, very nice [...] anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They’ll take care of you or leave you alone — whichever way you want it.<sup>81</sup>

The place bestows upon the women what they lack in their life: respect, freedom from harassment, a path to self-realisation and the liberty of expressing their womanhood. This chapter will explore the backgrounds from which the damaged women come and how a healing process takes place in the Convent. Studying each woman as an individual character who faces barriers in life, often imposed by patriarchal norms and values, helps give a better

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<sup>81</sup> Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (1998) (London: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 175-76.



understanding of Morrison's affirmation of the necessity and value of female homosociality as a 'cure'. This analysis will also offer a close look at the quality and level of connections and homosocial support among the women living in the town of Ruby, a place contaminated with male supremacy, drawing out comparisons with the Convent. The distinctive portrait of female homosociality in a broader sense of collective bonding will be also examined in the latter stages of the chapter.

### **Healing Bonds in a Safe Female Space**

To consider the importance of the main female characters in contributing to Morrison's focus on female homosociality in *Paradise*, I start by studying the first woman who moves into the Convent, Mavis, coming to her co-habitants in turn. Mavis, who has recently lost her twin babies, negligently leaving them in her car where they suffocated, is the first woman to take shelter in the Convent. It is worth mentioning that Connie and her adoptive parent, Reverend Mother, were already residents, but Mavis is the first one who moves in to find respite and peace. After losing two children, Mavis hallucinates that her husband and her remaining children are plotting her death; therefore, she steals the family car and runs away. Mavis, rather like Violet in *Jazz*, goes after a solution or solace outside of her home. While Violet finds Alice Manfred, and via the friendship she establishes with her, gradually overcomes the loss and dislocation she had in her life, Mavis find Connie, and heals her wounds by relying on her care and attention. Romero Channette suggests that 'While [...] earlier texts contain only glimpses of strategies for dealing with painful pasts, *Paradise* presents a fuller account

of healing individual and collective historical trauma.<sup>82</sup> Channette compares Morrison's *Paradise* to her earlier works, and points out that although Morrison suggests individual growth and well-being through sharing troubles and pain in her earlier narratives, here she goes a further step and deals with the healing of a collective trauma.

The first place that women might normally consider as a comfort and refuge is their mother's house. Mavis drives a long way to rest at her mother's house and to overcome her tragic bereavement. Yet her mother badgers her to go back and does not respect her confidence, secretly revealing her hiding place to Mavis's husband, Frank. The mother-daughter relationship appears to fail here, and Mavis does not receive the love and protection that she expects from her mother.

When Mavis runs away again, this time from her mother, she gives lifts to female hitchhikers in order to share the petrol and food costs. The description of the girls she picks up paints a picture of ready female bonding. When her car stops in the middle of the road and the dark frightens her, she remembers the girls and tries to imitate them in order to survive the setback: 'A little courage, she whispered. Like the girls running from, running toward. If they could roam around [...], make their own way alone or with only each other for protection, certainly she could wait in darkness for morning to come' (*P*, p. 36). The inspiration Mavis receives from the girls is invaluable compared to the damage done to her by her own mother. She learns to be courageous and depends on herself in the darkness, waiting for the promising morning to come. Morrison deliberately introduces these girls on Mavis's way to juxtapose the female homosociality she experiences with them to the dysfunctional relationship she has

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<sup>82</sup> Romero Channette, 'Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*', *African American Review*, 39/3 (2005), 415-430, p. 415.

had with her mother. Thus two sides of female homosociality are highlighted right from the beginning of the narrative, positive and negative.

When Mavis arrives at the Convent, initially she does not intend to stay long, only seeking to ask for help with her car. Connie, a resident at the Convent, welcomes her and unlike Mavis's mother does not start questioning her. She first feeds her and lets her calm down. Like a mother, she takes care of Mavis and consequently Mavis finds the Convent more comfortable and safer than her own house or her mother's. Connie asks Soane Morgan, her visitor and friend, to help Mavis get some gasoline. Soane treats Mavis in a friendly manner in Connie's house, but later on, when they are alone in the car, this response vanishes. It seems that Connie is the tie that bonds the women together and makes them feel safe and secure in her house. Although Mavis finally succeeds in filling up her car, she decides to stay on longer at the Convent. The comfort and security that Connie bestows upon her encourages her to remain, regardless of the fact that she has her own home and family.

One thing that makes Mavis stay is the 'outer-rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children — laughing? singing? — two of them were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it. When she opened her eyes, Connie was there' (*P*, p. 40). The reality of Mavis's life and the nightmare from which she suffers about the twins are interwoven here. Connie is the one who brings her back to real life and she is happy with Connie's help. Later, she contemplates Connie's absence, thinking: 'it was peaceful, but she wished Connie would return lest she start up again — imagining babies singing' (*P*, p. 42). In the quotation mentioned above, the narrator comments that Mavis wishes Connie's return to avoid the imaginary presence of the twins. The sound of her children not only does not comfort her, but it also hurts her to the point that

she seeks Connie's help in order to avoid it. Later on in the novel, Mavis establishes a very close and emotional friendship with Connie and even competes with another girl, Grace, to win Connie's attention. Considering their ages, Connie being in her late fifties or even early sixties and Mavis in her late twenties, Connie can be regarded as Mavis's other mother or even grandmother. Despite the fact of their age difference, they establish a very strong and supportive bond that lasts to the end of the novel.

Grace or Gigi is the second woman who joins the others at the Convent. She has lost her mother, and her father is incarcerated on death row. Her boyfriend Mikey is sentenced to three months in jail, and while travelling she is in search of a strange rock formation of a couple making love. What Gigi is looking for is love and belonging, and she finds it not in her heterosexual relationships but in her bonding with the women at the Convent.

When Gigi asks a local man, Roger Best, for a ride to the train station, he drops her at the Convent while collecting the body of the recently deceased Reverend Mother. Gigi, like the other women entering the Convent, does not intend to stay long, but when she finds bereaved Connie in a desperate situation she decides not to move on immediately. Connie is about to faint when Gigi finds her and she pleads with Gigi to remain. Gigi asks her if she can do anything, and Connie replies:

“Be a darling. Just watch. I haven't closed my eyes in seven-teen days.”

“Would a bed do the trick?”

“Be a darling. Be a darling. I don't want to sleep when nobody there to watch.”

“On the floor?”

But she was asleep. Breathing like a child (*P*, pp. 70-71).

What Connie wants is a companion, indeed a female companion. She has been raised under the supervision of her adoptive mother and the other holy Sisters; thus she feels she cannot stay or survive on her own when all of them are gone. Gigi, who is enchanted by the place, as are the other visitors, makes up her mind and stays in the Convent for years. After her first seven days, Mavis arrives back from a trip and finds Gigi sunbathing naked in the front garden. Connie welcomes Mavis wholeheartedly and decides to pursue her normal life activities once more. This shows the influence of Mavis and the importance of her connection to Connie. When Connie orders Gigi to get back in the house and put on some clothes, she assures her that: “we love you just the same” (*P*, p. 76). However, from this moment the relationship between Mavis and Gigi is a tense and jealous one until the collective healing of the women is complete.

The third girl to enter the Convent is Seneca. She was abandoned by her teenager mother when she was a little child. She has consequently been raised in orphanages and deprived of parental love. On a trip to take a message from her jailed boyfriend to his mother, Seneca meets a wealthy woman named Norma. Seeking out girls for sexual liaisons, Norma uses her as a prostitute, an exchange which can be identified as a negative form of female homosociality. However, Seneca leaves to travel on without purpose or destination. Subsequently, when a hitchhiking Seneca sees a weeping woman on the road, she pities her and stops to console her. She may not be able to stop Sweetie’s crying, but this incident brings her to the Convent, where she finds love and the company of female friends.

The last girl who comes and stays in the Convent is Pallas. She is brought by Billie Delia, a local girl who herself has spent a period of time in the house. Pallas’s parents

are divorced and she lives with her father, a wealthy lawyer who does not spend much time with her. Craving attention, she falls in love with her school janitor and runs away with him to find her mother. Yet her heart is broken when her lover and her mother betray her. Fleeing alone into the countryside, she is subsequently chased and assaulted by a gang of men. She is found by Billie and taken to the Convent where the women safely deliver her baby. Pallas's relationship to her mother, as the primary bond in a girl's life, is distorted and destroyed when her mother, without considering her emotions, makes love to her daughter's boyfriend.

After being gang raped, Pallas stops speaking. The first to whom she talks is Billie Delia, and the only one who succeeds in convincing her to speak out her grief is Connie. The role of Connie in caring for the wounded girl is transformative:

But Connie was magic. She just stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap, talk-crying at first, then just crying, while Connie said, "Drink a little of this," and "what pretty earrings," and "poor little one, poor, poor little one. They hurt my poor little one." It was wine-soaked and took an hour; it was backward and punctured and incomplete, but it came out — little one's story of who had hurt her (*P*, p. 173).

Typically, Connie appears as a loving mother figure who protects her charges wholeheartedly. It is her way of treating the traumatized girl that unlocks her silence and convinces her to tell the story. The influence of female bonding and homosociality is prominent in this episode. Here, Morrison portrays a positive example of a non-biological mother-daughter relationship that begins the recovery after male violence.

The narrative of *Paradise* wanders between the life-stories of people living in the all-black town of Ruby and the life-stories of the women at the nearby Convent. At two key points the stories and perspectives come together: the wedding scene and the killing scene. The wedding scene invites my attention next.

The wedding of Arnette and K.D. is the first group encounter between the Ruby community and the women of the Convent. The women come, not dressed up for a wedding, but in their everyday casual, revealing outfits. It is their freedom that bothers the Ruby people, who live a traditional existence isolated from the wider society of 1970s America. The town people watch how freely the outsiders dance:

The Convent girls are dancing; throwing their arms over their heads, they do this and that and then the other. They grin and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies. The local girls look over their shoulders and snort [...] one of them, with amazing hair, asks can she borrow a bike. Then another. They ride the bikes down central Avenue with no regard for what the breeze does to their long flowered skirts or how pumping pedals plumped their breasts (*P*, pp. 157-8).

The women dance as if no one is watching them, riding the bikes careless of the disapproving town eyes, and have fun regardless. Their behaviour is most disturbing to the women of Ruby, who have been taught that their only duty in life is satisfying their fathers and husbands. They have never experienced such license, especially not in public, and that is why, sensing a threat, they prompt the men to eject the Convent women from the wedding.

The reaction of the people from a conservative town to outrageous behaviour at a church wedding is not very surprising. The interesting reaction is that of the Convent women when they quit the celebration:

The silence in the Cadillac was not an embarrassed one. None of the passengers had high expectations of men in suits, so they were not surprised to be asked to leave the premises [...] one, the driver, had never seen a man who didn't look like an unlit explosion. Another, in the front passenger seat, considered the boring sexual images she had probably incited and recommitted herself to making tracks to somewhere else. A third, who had really been having fun, sat in the back seat thinking that although she knew what anger looked like, she had no idea what it might feel like [...] the fourth passenger was grateful for the expulsion (*P*, p. 162).

Here, Morrison juxtaposes the Convent women with the Ruby women or even perhaps women in general. What most women seek in their life is judged pointless by the Convent women. The typical aim of trying to attract men's attention is rejected as men's attention is of little importance to these women now. The driver, Mavis, who is a victim of domestic violence and patriarchy, expects nothing more than an aggressive reaction from men. Gigi, sitting next to Mavis, only cares about her own behaviour and is indifferent to the male response she might incite. Seneca has never experienced anger and thus does not understand what happened properly, and Pallas is happy that they are retreating to the Convent away from all attention. An interesting feature of the narrative technique is that here, the narrator refers to the women not by their individual names but as a whole. Indeed, the narrator in most cases does not mention them by name, but regards them as interlocking pieces of a puzzle



which complete each other. Even when the Convent is invaded, the reader has to infer what happens to each of the women since the narrator never reveals the identities of those at the heart of the attack.

Connie's healing skill is something which she bestows upon all these distressed, lacking and wounded women. They each try in their meditative Convent dreams to overcome the harsh realities and dominant orders which troubled them in earlier life. Importantly, they all participate in the process when each is dreaming and sharing what has hurt her. This community and wholeness in one's grief represents the gifts of female homosociality as explored in *Paradise*:

That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles [...]. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale (*P*, p. 264).

Although they are all 'dreaming' together, the narrator calls it a monologue. The discourse portrays the oneness of the women when they participate in the act of healing each other's wounds. By practising the healing ritual over and over, Mavis succeeds in overcoming her feeling of maternal loss, Gigi decides to have a better relationship with her dying father, Seneca comes to know that the one who deserted her in her childhood was not her sister, but her struggling teenage mother, and finally Pallas overcomes the dreadful experience of rape.

The restorative influence that their bonding brings them is more palpable at the ending of the novel when they are apparently resurrected. When Mavis again encounters her

daughter Sally, she can now establish a better relationship with her without her old fear that her own child is planning her death. Sally reaches out: “I don’t know what you think about me, but I always loved, always, even when...” (*P*, p. 315) while Mavis replies: “I know that Sal. Know it now anyway [...]. Count on me Sal” (*P*, p. 315). The mother-daughter relationship thus takes on a much more affirmative form after the communal healing experience shared by the women.

In the closing scenes, Gigi goes to pay a visit to her father and Pallas returns to her mother in order to collect a lost pair of shoes. Pallas does not intend to re-establish her relationship with her self-centred mother; the only thing she wants is to reclaim the positive bits of memories which she left there. Seneca is reunited with her mother, whom she thought to be her sister, but similarly does not show any interest in initiating closeness with her. The quest that she had always pursued in her life, for any kind of love, is changed now. She has a girlfriend who cares about her pain and she no longer needs a lost mother. The final scene depicts Connie and the Reverend Mother together, this time Connie receiving healing maternal love from her senior.

Connie and the women at the Convent not only heal their own wounds through their bonding, but also try to help women from the patriarchal society of Ruby to overcome their problems. To name a couple, Sweetie and Billie Delia take refuge in the Convent and seek out the women’s love and attention. Morrison seems to suggest that the magical healing aspect of the Convent comes about because of the range of united women and their connections in a space away from men. Wise woman Lone thinks about the road that connects Ruby to the Convent, realizing that the pedestrians on this route were all female: ‘Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and

forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost' (*P*, p. 270). The women that Lone describes all suffer and they head to the Convent for shelter and restoration. They are absorbed into the soothing space of female homosociality, which is abundant in that special place, the Convent.

### **Female Friendship Versus Mother-Daughter Relationships**

In *Paradise*, Morrison not only draws a comparison between the lives of Ruby women and those of the women at the Convent but also, in most cases, she portrays a failure of biological mother-daughter relationships in comparison to sustaining female friendships. Different connections between mothers and their daughters are depicted as distorted or impeded, while female non-filial connections are shown as more complete and successful. Revealing examples of these relationships can be traced in the bonds between Pat and her daughter and Mavis and her daughter, and also those between Seneca and Pallas and their respective mothers. In the following part, I will focus on these unsuccessful female connections.

The reason why Mavis runs away from her home is not only the memories of her recently deceased twins or the brutal treatment from her husband, but also partly it is because of her daughter's strange behaviour. Mavis thinks that her children, chiefly her daughter Sally, are planning to kill her. Mavis has been living a miserable family life before the death of the twins and their loss makes it worse. Mavis suffers from bullying in her marriage and her patriarchal drunken husband only thinks about satisfying his own needs. Mavis is afraid of Frank, who she thinks motivates her children to turn against her. At the end of the novel, her daughter reveals that she was simply scared and did not know how to defend herself,

feeling that Mavis did not protect them from Frank. The fact is that both Mavis and her daughter have been afraid of the man of the household, who instead of providing them with a safe and secure home, dominates and assaults them sexually. Here, in an echo of Bill Cosey in *Love*, an interfering, corrupting male presence does not allow a mother-daughter relationship to flourish.

The conversation between Mavis and Sally at the end of the novel reveals what happened between them earlier:

“I was scared all the time, Ma. All the time. Even before the twins. But when you left, it got worse. You don’t know. I mean I was scared to fall asleep. [...] Daddy was — shit. I don’t know how you stood it. He’d get drunk and try to bother me, Ma.”

“Oh, baby.”

“I fought him, though. Told him the next time he passed out I was gonna cut his throat open. Would have, too.” (*P*, p. 314).

As a child, and especially as a girl, Sally felt defenceless. She says she was more scared after the death of the twins. Perhaps since society blamed Mavis for that tragic accident, she felt the same thing might happen to her as well. As a child who relies upon her parents to protect her, how could she respond to having a drunken father and a careless mother? Who would she count on to feel supported and secure? She has learnt that she should only rely on herself and protect herself even against her parents. Her hostile behaviour has left Mavis with the idea that her children had turned against her. She did not stay and try to reconstruct her relationship with her children, but instead resorted to running away and leaving the

oppressive family life behind. Neither Mavis nor her frightened daughter can be blamed; the narrative shows that the one who is responsible for the collapse of the family is the selfish, abusive father who causes Mavis to flee.

While Mavis proves unable to act as a good mother to her daughter, interestingly she too does not receive any motherly support from her own mother. This figure only sends the family money and fails to attend the twins' funeral, where she could have stood beside her daughter and brought her consolation. She even calls Frank, Mavis's husband, and tells him about Mavis's hiding place. Birdie disappoints Mavis as a mother, and forces her to run away again since she cannot feel secure at her own mother's house. Indeed, her mother acts as a mouthpiece for patriarchal values and reminds Mavis that, despite all her problems, she should go back home and be a good mother to her children. Morrison thus shows that the comfort and safety that Mavis finds at the Convent is what she could never gain in her own house or her mother's. The affectionate relationship between her and Connie is not comparable to the damaging connection between her and her biological mother, and even between her and her daughter. She fails to play her role as a protective mother and she receives no sympathy from her own mother; thus, in Mavis's life all the mother-daughter relationships turn out to be dysfunctional.

Mavis only succeeds in rebuilding her relationship with Sally after her valuable experiences at the Convent. Once, after fighting hard with Grace, Mavis realizes that she has become more powerful and independent than before:

Not the fight. That wasn't important. In fact she had enjoyed it. Pounding, pounding, even biting Gigi was exhilarating, just as cooking was. It was more

proof that the old Mavis was dead. The one who couldn't defend herself from an eleven-year-old girl, let alone her husband (*P*, p. 171).

This incident shows the powerful, changing impact of female homosociality on Mavis. Her connections with other women at the Convent help her to bring her real strength to the surface and redefine her identity. She is no more an obedient, victimized wife, or a mother who fears her own children. She is quite transformed into a self-reliant woman, thanks to the Convent dwellers and their shared dreaming. As mentioned above, although female connections work pretty well for Mavis in gaining a truly changed and resilient character, she fails until the very end to establish a positive relationship with her own daughter. Nothing is told about Mavis's contact with her mother after her stay at the Convent, but her relationship with her daughter improves and at their closing encounter they can finally communicate and tell each other about their fears and hopes.

The other mother-daughter relationship which is problematised in the novel is that between Seneca and her teenage mother, Jean. When Seneca recalls the time when she was only five years old and was abandoned by her mother — whom she thought was her sister — and she describes how she tried to be good so her sister/mother would come back, the tragic neglect evokes sympathy from the reader: 'she had spent four nights and five days knocking on every door in her building asking "is my sister in here?"' (*P*, p.126). Seneca desperately tries to be good out of a childish hope that she might then get her sister/mother back, and she practices this obedient behaviour right until she moves into the Convent. There, she learns how to reject victimhood and how to live her own life. At the end of the novel, when her mother recognizes her, she does not respond to her question or acknowledge their relation. During the healing meditation practiced at the Convent, the women tell her that Jean must be

her mother and not her sister. The true story of her life is revealed by her female friends at the Convent, and they are her saviours from her long-held ignorance and self-blame. Although leaving a five-year-old girl alone seems cruel, one should take into consideration that Jean is a child as well. She is so young that Seneca had always thought that she was her sibling. The identity of her father is not revealed. Jean perhaps is either raped or has an unexpected pregnancy at a very young age. The absence of the father of the child and a wider support network contributes to Jean's inability to care for Seneca and herself.

Seneca, like Mavis, does not have a nurturing mother-daughter relationship, and she only really grows up when she stays at the Convent with the other women. Her mother's abandonment has a damaging effect on her sense of self, and she tries to be good and obedient out of a fear of losing the people around her. Once a safety pin in her jeans scratched her, attracting Mama Greer's attention at the orphanage, and from then on 'she pin-scratched herself on purpose and showed it to Mama Greer' (*P*, p. 261), seeking out sympathy. Although her own mother leaves her and she engages in self-harm, the care Seneca receives from the Convent women eventually enables her to reconstruct her life and attain self-actualisation.

Pallas, the last girl to arrive at the Convent, also suffers from a difficult mother-daughter connection. When she is sixteen, she falls in love with her school janitor and elopes with him to pay a visit to her artist mother. This boyfriend, who is closer to her mother in terms of age, starts a sexual relationship with her mother, who willingly participates in this betrayal without a thought for her daughter. Catching them having sex causes a breakdown in Pallas and she runs away. Driving at high speed, she has a car accident and then is chased by a group of men who gang rape her. Seeking help in a clinic, she meets Billie Delia, a local

girl who sends her to the Convent. The Convent women later help her to deliver her baby. Connie enables her to tell her story and Seneca shares a caring relationship with her. Mavis cooks for her and lets her sleep in her room, and Gigi shows affectionate concern. Connie plays a miraculous, motherly role in caring for the wounded Pallas. It is her way of treating the runaway that unlocks her silence and convinces her to share her traumatic past. Morrison foregrounds the influence of female bonding and homosociality strongly in this episode. Pallas finds love and care at the Convent, whereas her own mother betrays her and damages her feelings and ability to shape a future.

The problem between Pallas and her mother perhaps echoes bell hooks's notion about competition engendered between mothers and their daughters. As noted earlier, bell hooks proposes that through the force of patriarchal society and its sexual economy, a successful mother may regard her daughter as a potential rival to herself, one that can win men's attention through her youthfulness.<sup>83</sup> Here, one might infer that Pallas's mother, who is a painter, views her own daughter as a rival, attracting a boyfriend who is more suitable for her in terms of age. Again, the enforcement of patriarchal values can be seen as a barrier to women's proper connections.

The relationship between Billie Delia and her mother, Patricia, both from *Ruby*, is also worth looking at here. Billie Delia, after a serious fight with her mother, runs off to the Convent and spends about two weeks there:

They had treated her well, had not embarrassed her with sympathy, had just given her sunny kindness. No one insisted on hearing what drove her there, but she could

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<sup>83</sup> bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), pp. 123-24.



tell they would listen if she wanted them to [...] Billie Delia was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were [...] she had another question: when will they return? (*P*, p. 308).

Patricia, born to a light-skinned mother, suffers from inverse colour discrimination in Ruby, which is an all-black town. She struggles hard to raise her daughter to fit in with the patriarchal standards of Ruby society so that, unlike her and her father, who have been excluded, her daughter will be accepted in the community. Billie thus grows up under the watchful eyes of a strict mother who does not establish an affectionate relationship with her. After their violent fight, in which her mother attacks her with an iron, Billie takes shelter in the Convent. There, she finds peace and receives unconditional love, care and 'sunny kindness' from the women. It is Billie who, at the end, wishes that one day the Convent women will come back and tear up the town which is no longer a home for her.

In all of the above-mentioned cases, the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship is replaced with nurturing communal female connections. Mavis, Seneca, Pallas and Billie Delia, escaping from their unsupportive mothers, take refuge at the Convent and receive love and affection there. Morrison shows the disturbing relationships they experience with their mothers to be substituted by the life-changing connections they establish with Convent women. Female homosociality helps all these women to find their proper role and home in life, and also aids them in bringing out the hidden courageous, powerful and independent woman inside them. Although the very first female connection in a girl's life fails them (that is the maternal one), they can enjoy love and support in the female homosociality they experience and build at the Convent. The novel's multiple sub-plots also

demonstrate that the recurring barrier to having a close mother-daughter connection in most cases is the patriarchal values which are forced upon women.

### **Female Connections among the Ruby Women**

By juxtaposing two groups of women — the Convent women and Ruby women — I suggest that Morrison intends to portray a larger-scale landscape of female homosociality, in which a male-less community is compared to a patriarchal one. At the Convent, the women care for themselves and take care of each other, while in the town women are held up to the patriarchal standards of being a ‘good wife’ and ideal mother, and have almost forgotten their own self and identity. Female connections exist among Ruby women, but they are not as strong and supportive as are those between the Convent women and are revealed only in the interstices of the narrative.

Two highlighted female characters, about whose lives the narrator gives more detailed information, are Soane and Dovey, who are sisters married to twin brothers. Although they are biological sisters and the reader expects a stronger bond between them than, for instance, two friends, the narrator does not offer many episodes treating their encounters and relation. They are both fully devoted to their marital life and except for two short conversations — one at Arnette’s wedding and one at the ending of the novel at the Convent — there is no trace of communication and connection between them.

Dovey is married to Steward Morgan and the couple do not have any children. Steward, who is addicted to Blue Boy tobacco, has long lost his sense of taste, and Dovey regards this as a sign of her kitchen efforts being ignored by her husband. Steward seems to

fail in conveying his love to his wife, meaning that Dovey turns to the visits of a stranger — the narrative not directly revealing whether he is a hallucination or real — in her town house when Steward is away at the farm. Dovey is thrilled by the unnamed traveller who often chooses his path through Dovey's home. The way the narrator comments on his careful listening to Dovey's deep feelings highlights what is truly lacking in Dovey's marital life:

Thing was, when he came, she talked nonsense. Things she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said. By a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again (*P*, p. 92).

Dovey yearns for a sympathetic companion to give outlet to her grief and joy: a good listener to her heart, which Steward is not. As a stereotypical woman in a patriarchal society, Dovey regards her deep feelings as nonsense and 'unrelated to the world's serious issues'. She quickly stops herself from more 'babbling' and restrains her thoughts in case she loses her mystery man.

On the other hand, Steward wants to prevent Dovey from staying alone at the town house, but he does not know what he can do to reunite them:

He did not look forward to any bed without Dovey in it and tried again to think of an argument to keep her from staying in town so often. It would be futile; he could deny her nothing [...]. Sleep without the fragrance of her hair next to him was impossible (*P*, p. 100).

Like a typical man brought up in patriarchal surroundings, the first solution that comes to Steward's mind is to object and argue with Dovey to prevent her from staying at the town house. Yet the narrator describes Steward's feeling toward Dovey in a highly sensual and poetic way, suggesting emotions that the reader otherwise could never imagine someone as authoritative and reserved as Steward holding. When Steward goes to bed alone, he thinks 'sleep without the fragrance of her hair next to him was impossible' (*P*, p. 100). The narrative exposes Steward's romantic and dependent inner voice regardless of his harsh external behaviour, although this insight also reveals his idealisation of a particular image of womanhood. Patriarchal values not only take away women's self-esteem and power, but they also paralyse men from conducting a balanced, open emotional life. As Steward cannot or will not articulate his feelings, Dovey turns away from him for comfort and sharing. The problem of Steward and Dovey is rooted in the dominant modes of Ruby society.

Soane, Dovey's sister, is a more developed character in the novel since she is connected to Connie and thus the Convent. Soane is married to Deek, Steward's brother. When she gets pregnant and does not wish to keep the baby, she goes to Connie to help her abort the child. Although Soane always regards the act as a sin, it is one of the rare times in her life when she, as a woman, decides about her own body and future. Soane knows that Deek once had a relationship with Connie, but she ignores it since Connie is the one who both helps her in taking life — by aborting her child — and also in giving life back to her son, who was on the brink of death following an accident. Soane is the one who rushes to help Connie when she is informed that Reverend Mother is dead:

Soane had to hurry then too. Speak to Roger, go to the bank to telephone strangers up north, collect food from neighbourhood women and cook something herself.

She, Dovey and Anna carried it out there [...] Connie seemed strange, broken somehow and Soane added her to the list of people who worried her life (*P*, p. 101).

In a rare example of female homosociality in *Ruby*, when Reverend Mother dies, the women mobilise together and cook food for Connie as a sign of condolence. Connie still helps Soane by sending her a homemade tonic, which helps Soane to overcome the weakening loss of her two sons in Vietnam. On the other hand, Soane pays regular visits to the Convent and sometimes helps the girls living there. Once, Deek warns her against the women at the Convent, but she does not heed his warning. The help and affection that she receives from Connie seem to be more valuable than Deek's caution.

From Deek's point of view, Soane makes a good, dedicated housewife: 'She was as beautiful as it was possible for a good woman to be, she kept a good home and did good works everywhere' (*P*, p. 113). When their sons die, we see Deek's patriarchal concern with establishing family and a patrilineal line of descendants. He thinks that while Soane is mourning the death of her two sons, 'he was burdened with the loss of all sons. Since his twin had no children the Morgans had arrived at the end of the line' (*P*, p. 113). Once, when Soane tells him that she does not understand something, he answers bluntly "'I do [understand] [...] you do not need to'" (*P*, p. 107). Deek stands for all the men raised in a patriarchal system, who only regard women as objects of beauty and a means of good domestic service. He measures up Soane's goodness as a housewife, not as an individual woman. Soane gets her identity through her physical attributes and caring skills in Deek's definition of a good woman. Woman as housewife seems more appealing to him than woman holding power and wisdom. Soane has wisdom and power, but, like other women who are victims of this

restrictive gender ideology, she bottles up her feelings and tries to find other ways to compensate for what has been taken from her.

Though both sisters share the same miserable, limited life in Ruby, there is no point in the novel at which they come together and share their preoccupations or worries. As mentioned before, there are only two times in the whole narrative when a conversation between these two occurs. The second one, towards the end of *Paradise*, alters their relationship forever. When Connie is shot dead, the two sisters have an argument over which of their husbands has killed her, and this changes the way they interrelate afterwards.

The conversation on their way to the Convent after the attack differentiates Soane from Dovey. They start sharing their opinions on the men's aggressive plan for dealing with the women at the Convent:

“People talk about them all the time, though. Like they were ... slime.”

“They're different is all.”

“I know, but that's been enough before.”

“These are women, Dovey. Just women.”

“Whores, though, and strange too.”

“Dovey!”

“That's what Steward says, and if he believes it” (*P*, p. 288).

The dialogue here reveals a difference between the sister who has developed real contact with the Convent women, and the one who follows blindly what her husband dictates to her. Soane, who has been to the Convent several times and is a close friend of Connie, cannot stand any maligning of them, while Dovey repeats what Steward fills her head with. Soane

considers them as just women like themselves, while in Dovey's mind they are whores who have transgressed the ideal model of femininity. Dovey is enslaved by patriarchal values and here becomes a mouthpiece for them. By doing so, she portrays female hostility and rehearses the demonization of women, which constitutes a negative form of female relation.

Lone, another female inhabitant of Ruby, now an old lady, has lost her mother when she is born and so was taken in by a local family. Lone, like L in *Love*, acts as the mouthpiece of wisdom in the narrative since her ideas and behaviour gain the reader's support and are presented positively. Although she has been a midwife in Ruby for almost a lifetime, the women of Ruby increasingly use the hospital rather than delivering their babies at home through the help of Lone.

No matter she searched the county to get them the kind of dirt they wanted to eat.  
No matter she had gotten in bed with them, pressing the soles of her feet to theirs,  
helping them push, push! Or massaged their stomachs with sweet oil for hours. No  
matter at all (*P*, p. 271).

This passage shows how modern women reject Lone's help, despite all the labours she has gone through for them. One of the women tells Lone that if she delivers at home, 'she'd be fixing the family's breakfast the second or third day and worrying about the quality of the cow's milk as well as her own' (*P*, p. 271). Again, here the social norms of the patriarchal society are to blame, evaluating a woman's worth by measuring the quality of her caring services even shortly after childbirth.

Fairy is the townswoman who earlier teaches Lone midwifery skills, explaining that:

“Men scared of us, always will be. To them we’re death’s hand-maiden standing as between them and the children their wives carry.” During those times, Fairy said, the midwife is the interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skills so much depended, and the dependency irritated them (*P*, p. 272).

Fairy well knows that in general the men of the Ruby community are scared of powerful women. They are resentful of relying upon the skills of a midwife and of the traditional woman-centred role. This rare dependency and establishment of women’s ordered space bothers them, for it is beyond their control. There is another point to draw from this quotation: Fairy talks about men’s fear of midwives, on whom children’s lives are dependent, yet there is no mention of the wives whose lives would be in danger as well at the time of delivery. This provides yet another example of Morrison exploring the status of women in Ruby and their value in male eyes.

The narrator tells us that not only does Lone know how to deliver babies, she is also bestowed with the gift of intuiting people’s thoughts. When she eavesdrops on the men’s gathering, she can vividly interpret their violent plans for the Convent women. Sargeant, for instance, is after the Convent land — ‘how much less his outlay would be if he owned the Convent land’ (*P*, p. 277) — while Wisdom Poole ‘would be looking for a reason to explain why he had no control any more over his brothers and sisters’ (*P*, p. 277). The Fleetwoods would be seeking to blame someone rather than their own genes for Jeff’s retarded children, and other men as well shape their own reasons to have enough of a pretext to attack the Convent women. Yet Lone sees something more than these excuses on their mind:



So, Lone thought, the fangs and the tail are somewhere else. Out yonder all slithery in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven (*P*, p. 276).

The novel's mouthpiece of wisdom has explained the truth here. What Morrison tries to convey through Lone is the horrified men's real motivation for invading the Convent. They are disturbed by the independent homosociality in the Convent, and groups of women living their own life are threatening to them. There is also the danger of this so-called pollution sneaking into their houses and contaminating their wives and daughters as well. Thus they need to act now and suppress any threat that defies their manhood and the dependency of women upon them.

The unity and support among Convent residents, the way they receive any wounded refugee from Ruby society, cannot be traced among the women in the town. When Lone finds out the men's intention to invade the Convent, she seeks out help. She tries to convince her relative Sut, but she fails in her attempt; she then thinks of going to the Ruby women, but their relationships with the men who are taking part in the plan discourage her:

She couldn't go to Soane because of Deek [...] she thought about Kate but knew she would not go up against her father. She considered Penelope but dismissed her, since she was not only married to Wisdom, she was Sargeant's daughter (*P*, p. 281).

This passage reveals that not only are women identified through their connections to men, but also they cannot stand against them or have their own voice. While the women at the Convent receive each grieving newcomer with open arms and unite against any disturbance, the women of the town are separated by their relationships to specific male figures, and Lone does not expect them to stand together against the men who give them their identity. The homosociality and independence that we find at the Convent does not exist among women living in the town, and that is why the Convent is a big threat to the patriarchy, potentially disrupting their order and peaceful life.

Significantly, Lone is the one who teaches Consolata healing powers and opens her eyes to the natural, non-rational, and spiritual world. The skill that she teaches Consolata helps the Convent women to heal their wounds and gain more self-respect and confidence. It can be said that Lone is also indirectly engaged in establishing female homosociality in the Convent and helps the women shape their community there. She is a compelling, multi-faceted character, and some of her abilities are beyond those of normal human beings. She also acts as the survivor of Consolata at the end, after the invasion of the Convent. One reading suggests that when Lone is alone with the dead body of Connie, she practices the same skills on Connie that she taught her to use with others. This could be interpreted as a resurrection, giving Connie another life. The possibility recalls Fairy's words to Lone about male views of midwives. Lone here brings Connie back to life in an echo of how she brings children into life. This power of life giving, which is symbolically one of women's skills, terrifies men. Lone is not in immediate danger since she has been a member of Ruby society most of her life, but those outsider women who dare to have their own place and live their own life are sentenced to death.

Turning to another revealing town woman, Sweetie is a fragile character who is portrayed as an extreme model of a dedicated mother. She is married to Jeff Fleetwood and they have four disabled children who cannot move or talk. She imprisons herself in the house for almost six years out of devotion to the care of her retarded children. When Sweetie eventually decides to leave the house on a winter morning, she thinks after a break she will return here just in time:

To massage a little bottom to keep the sores away; or to siphon phlegm or grind food or clean teeth or trim nails or launder out urine or cradle in her arms or sing but mostly in time to watch. To never take her eyes off unless her mother-in-law was there, and to watch then as well, because Miss Mable's eyes weren't as sharp as they once had been. Others offered help, repeatedly at first, irregularly now, but she always declined [...] Jeff and her father-in-law couldn't look, let alone watch (*P*, pp. 124-124 [125?]).

The drudgery and hardship through which Sweetie has gone are imposed upon her by the social norms which expect only the mother to take care of and sacrifice herself for her children. In the quotation on Lone's midwifery, the narrator reveals how fathers are concerned about their children's life and health, but when they are disabled it seems it is the mother who should take care of the children. Here Jeff, as the father, and his own father appear unable to even take a look at the children, never mind help the women in this dire situation.

While the heterosexual relationship fails here, as evidenced by Sweetie's loneliness in carrying the burden of taking care of four retarded children, female connection wins over

and Sweetie receives the help and gestures of tenderness of her mother-in-law and the women at the Convent.

When dawn broke and Mable came into the dim room with a cup of coffee, Sweetie stood to take it. She knew that Mable had already run her bathwater and folded a towel and fresh nightgown over the chair in the bedroom. And she knew she would offer to do her hair — braid it, wash it, roll it or just scratch her scalp. The coffee would be wonderful, dark and loaded with sugar (*P*, p. 125).

The caring connection between Sweetie and Mable supports her during six difficult years. She stands against the hardship through the help of another woman, and surprisingly she receives no support from men: ‘both of the Mrs. Fleetwoods spent all their energy, time and affection on the four children still alive — so far. Fleet and Jeff, grateful but infuriated by that devotion, turned their shame sideways’ (*P*, p. 58). Mable helps and supports Sweetie to tolerate the heavy responsibility, and they share their grief together. In one winter episode, tired of staying at home for such a long time and feeling the pressure of her role, Sweetie decides to leave the house as if she has to do something important and after a break then return. When Sweetie approaches the Convent, we are told she ‘was cozy. Although she had felt none of the biting cold sweeping the road, she was comforted by the warm snow covering her hair’ (*P*, p. 129). Through this image, Morrison suggests the promising support and care of the women at the Convent, and encourages her to go forward to a male-less society where women can enjoy homosociality without any disturbance.

When she arrives, the Convent women welcome her and ‘in the quiet room Sweetie thanked her Lord and drifted into a staticky, troubled sleep’ (*P*, p. 129). After six years of

little sleep, finally ‘she knew she slept because she dreamed a little’ (*P*, p. 125). Though she has a ‘troubled’ sleep, her mind being preoccupied with thoughts of her children and the responsibility she feels toward them, the comfort and care that the Convent women give her at least allow her to take a rest and forget about her miserable home life. In the end, Sweetie runs away from the Convent since she is disturbed by the memory of her disabled children. Her motherhood duties prevent her from enjoying more than brief peace and comfort. Living in a patriarchal world, where all the duties of raising families are on the mothers’ shoulders, Sweetie temporarily loses her sense. Although she has her mother-in-law as a helper, she receives no support from her husband in this matter. This situation illustrates the dominant view that it is only the woman’s fault if the children are retarded and that the father had no role in bringing the children into this world. Though the patriarchal relationship weighs Sweetie down, some female homosociality and bonding help to lessen her burden.

Arnette Fleetwood is a final interesting female member of the Ruby community. She has a youthful relationship with K.D. Morgan, and after she has been insulted (and secretly impregnated) by him, the men of their two families get together to decide about her future. The meeting takes place with none of the women, even Arnette herself, present. Regardless of Arnette’s opinion, they agree that K.D.’s uncle should help with her college fee to resolve the dispute. When Steward asks whether she will want to attend the college in August, Fleet answers: “‘I am her father. I’ll arrange her mind’” (*P*, p. 61). Not only does the opinion of the girl seem unimportant but, as a symbol of a father entangled in patriarchal norms, Fleet asserts that he is the one who sets his daughter’s mind.

When Arnette carries K.D.’s child he selfishly leaves her alone to cope with her situation, her misery. Indeed, he has ignored her ‘for four years and consented to a wedding

only when he was kicked out of another woman's bed' (*P*, p. 152). Being raised in a society where men are valued, K.D. knows well that 'it was the unmarried mother-to-be (not the father-to-be) who would have to ask her church's forgiveness' (*P*, p. 152). Although Arnette suffers a lot after losing her child, she still stays faithful to K.D. and she writes to him every week for one year when she is at college, letters which remain unopened and unanswered. Eventually, when K.D. is rejected by Grace, he agrees to marry Arnette. The desperate bride feels proud to have secured her groom. She is happy that she

[h]ad won, finally, the husband her maid of honour despised. A husband who had propositioned Billie Delia before and after his thing with Arnette [...] the groom let the bride suffer for four years (*P*, p. 152).

Although Arnette knows all the shortcomings of K.D., she is happy that she is married to the one with whom she had sex for the first time. In this patriarchal society, where all the wrongdoings and failures of men are forgiven and overlooked, women have to ignore them as well so that they do not lose their dream life. Arnette is also blessed by the help of the women at the Convent, who nurse her when she loses her child. Although she later bears a grudge against them, again their care helps her to go on in the future. Regardless of the help that she receives from the women at the Convent, and also her bonding with Billie Delia, Arnette prefers the non-ideal heterosexual relationship and prioritises it in her life. The 'prime order' is unbalanced here since the heterosexual relationship and the (non) ideal man is made primary.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex, 2001), p. 35.

Arnette regards the wedding as a resolution to regain face in public and make things right. According to patriarchal rules, she has to legitimate the transgression she has committed: pregnancy out of wedlock. As a defenseless female character, an imposed wedding to the one who betrayed her is the only solution. Echoing the part of the wedding which has been looked at previously in this chapter, there is a salient juxtaposition of codes of conduct. Although all the Ruby women secretly know that this wedding is only covering up what has happened before between K.D. and Arnette, they try to act as normal and ignore the fact that this is a hollow marriage for the sake of patriarchal values. They unconsciously accept the prevailing norms and confirm the unwritten patriarchal law.

On the other hand, the Convent women consider this event as a farce and mimicry of a real union, which explains their behaviour at the wedding. Intentionally or unintentionally, they make fun of this sad comic show which has been set up to cover K.D. and Arnette's background. Connie does not participate at all, and the other four women do not take this marriage seriously until they are expelled from the event. It is as if these women are brought to the wedding to violate the so-called sacred ceremony and show the reality underneath.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that by featuring two different communities and juxtaposing them, Morrison tries to show two extremes in women's lives and bonding. The community of Ruby seems to be a safe place for women to live before the other community comes into existence. Women accept their status in life and obey the patriarchal values men force upon them. Although each of them is bottling up her own miseries and loneliness, women like

Soane, Dovey, Sweetie, and Arnette live their everyday lives in the town without any complaint. The narrator in the beginning portrays Ruby as a peaceful community, where a woman can go to a neighbour to have a chat on the porch even at night and come back home safe and sound. Yet at the end, when the men attack the Convent where a community of women lives together, this image shatters and Ruby cannot be considered as a secure place for women anymore.

The women at the Convent enjoy the liberty to live their own life and, with the help of Connie, each of them succeeds in overcoming the troubles that the outside world has caused them. They also welcome any woman from Ruby society who needs shelter and bring some solace to her. At the end of *Paradise*, where they all shave their heads and have a ritual dance under the rain, this image brings to mind a vision of free women who are in harmony with the natural elements and Mother Nature. They care, they nurse, they rescue each other, and such bonding and homosociality empower them to help other women as well. They are the embodiment of the definition of female homosociality introduced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.<sup>85</sup> Each of them, before moving to the Convent, has been shattered by a man or the patriarchal values of their society. They live a short life at the Convent, free and in peace. Then they are invaded by men who cannot tolerate female homosociality and independent women, whom they consider as a threat to their manhood and pride.

Although Morrison portrays two extremely different settings, the women bear similarities across both places. They are wounded and they suffer from male oppression, violence, neglect or control. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, in her article “Passing on” Death, highlights one of the ubiquitous features found in almost every work by Morrison, the pairing of characters:

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<sup>85</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp.2-3.



As Morrison doubles elsewhere, she doubles the Convent women in the women of Ruby: ironic and paradoxical doubles supplant the one-to-one pairings of other novels. Moreover, collectively, the women bear critical similarities with mothers, daughters, and sisters in other Morrison novels.<sup>86</sup>

As Aguiar points out, all women share difficult situations at some point and Morrison pairs them to portray more effectively different responses and the difference sometimes made by access to support, nurture and self-belief. For example, the earlier pairing of Sula and Nel, opposites brought up under different circumstances but who complete each other. The similarities between mother-daughter relationships across many of Morrison's works are also noteworthy. In *Paradise*, as Aguiar signals, the pairing is taken to another level as the women of the town and the women of the Convent intersect with each other while also modeling opposite paths in the engagement with patriarchy.

What makes female homosociality distinctive in this novel is the explicitly collective spirit among the Convent women who share this bonding. Although Aguiar comments on the doubles which Morrison creates in almost all her novels, she significantly refers to the women in *Paradise* as forming two contrasting groups. As explored earlier in this chapter, even Connie regards the residents of the Convent as a group of wounded girls. She does not separate them by the motivations which have brought them here or even by their characters, class or race. Regardless of their different stories and backgrounds, they share one thing; they have suffered at the hands of men.

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<sup>86</sup> Aguiar, Sara, "“Passing on” Death: Stealing Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*", *African American Review*, 38/3 (2004), 513-519, p. 515.

Unlike the Convent women, whose identities as separate selves fade off bit by bit, with their individual names no longer being mentioned in the narrative, the Ruby women keep their so-called distinct identities. However, they remain known and defined through their connections to men and male family members. It seems they cannot act collectively and grow defiantly powerful like the women at the Convent while still dwelling within patriarchy. Meanwhile those healed at the Convent emerge from their histories and the links that defined them as the wife of a man, or the girlfriend of a boy, or the daughter of a father, to experience their true and whole selves.

The richly developed female homosociality seen at the Convent cannot be traced in Ruby society, where even two sisters like Soane and Dovey suffer from a lack of communication. Although apparently they live a happy, contented existence, inside each woman's mind there is nagging worry about the hollow, miserable life they lead. The independent homosociality in the Convent works as a threat to the townsmen because of its very difference. They try to demonise the outside women in order to keep their wives and daughters away from any influence that might change them or suggest rebellion. They do not succeed, since women find the Convent a safe place where they can gain some respite and healing for their scars. Many of the Ruby women have been to the Convent at least once and have enjoyed the support and care bestowed upon them there.

In this novel, Morrison centrally and explicitly addresses female homosociality and the comfort, protection and growth which it brings. At the beginning, she sets up Ruby, once supposed to be a paradise, but gradually revealed as failing in its promise for women and poisoned by insularity and its patriarchal order. The community at the Convent is then developed to give the reader a glimpse of a female haven where women can heal through

sharing their lives, stories, love and care with each other. I have also explored a pattern of lacking or lost mother-daughter relationships being substituted for by non-filial female bonding. The two paradises in this text — one created by men and the other one created by women — are juxtaposed to enact a more unequivocally positive sense of female homosociality as a means for combating and recovering from oppression than we have found elsewhere.

## Conclusion

On a very broad canvas, the black feminist writer Toni Morrison draws complex female homosociality, in the process providing a much extended definition of the term. She goes beyond differences of age, class, time period and sometimes race in depicting female bonds. She introduces women characters from different backgrounds and upbringings yet they all share one similarity; they are all in some way affected by society's patriarchal norms and often have experienced limitation and damage at the hands of patriarchy as well as racism. Morrison's narratives also suggest a possible form of resistance and healing: supportive bonds between females. As my thesis has explored, however, relationships between women are frequently shown to be double edged. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also refers to the complicated nature of female homosociality when defining her use of the word 'homosocial' not for 'a particular affective state or emotion' but meaning an 'affective or social force' where, 'even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred' this 'glue [...] shapes important relationships' (2).

As an African American writer and critic, Morrison confronts racial issues in her works but this thesis has traced how frequently slavery, its legacies and later racial discrimination are explored in relation to interpersonal connections, especially in terms of how they affect forms of female homosociality. For instance, in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* Morrison depicts the impact of slavery on the primary female to female bond which is the mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, Sethe is pushed to such an extent that she murders her own daughter in order to keep her away from the tortures she herself experienced. In *A Mercy*, Florens's mother similarly makes a crucial decision on giving her daughter away,

facing separation, to protect her. In this study, I have highlighted Morrison's feminist approach to questions and histories of race, an approach neglected by some of her writing peers.

I have also discussed how Morrison chooses to portray her female characters in non-idealised ways. Even very strong, independent female figures like Eva and Pilate, who have been celebrated by most critics, are shown to have flaws. They are fallible and, like other women, are in positions shaped by patriarchal and hierarchical contexts. Pilate is a self-reliant, powerful woman who supports her household yet even she yields to a prioritisation of Milkman's life over everyone else's. Eva sacrifices her leg to protect her family during a time of economic deprivation and yet fails to articulate her love to her daughter Hannah. Indeed, my chapters have identified a chain of cases of problematic mothering, most recently Mavis and Patricia among others in *Paradise*, although Morrison too reveals the external forces that have impacted negatively on such familial bonds.

Morrison's fictions do not totally reject heterosexual relationships but, like Janice G. Raymond, they seem to work to affirm female ties as primary. Often narratives gradually unfold a dominant order in which 'A man and a woman's relationship was primary. Women [...] were always secondary relationships when the man was not there'. At the same time they indicate the benefits of a reversal of the preference given to men; as Raymond puts it 'We had to be taught to like one another' (79). Interestingly, although some of Morrison's novels foreground men as destructive patriarchs such as Bill Cosey in *Love*, she does not turn away from heterosexual relationships. As I have suggested, in some cases Morrison considers female homosociality as a means to strengthen heterosexual unions. In *Jazz*, only after the development of the friendship between Violet and Alice and the healing this allows is Violet

able to rebuild her marital bond with Joe. Morrison does not condemn all male-female love relationships in her critique of male primacy and investigation of family lives distorted by it; at the same time, she invites women to sustain female bonds by illustrating processes of self-growth, recognition and actualization, which then lead to better relationships with men and women. Only in *Paradise*, where the models of two opposite communities take centre stage, do we find the celebration of a collective female homosociality that heals but in a space distinctively separate from men as well as from patriarchy.

By selecting seven novels, spanning from early career works to very recent ones, I have sought to trace the extent of, and variations in, Morrison's approach to female homosociality. This preoccupation runs as a constant thread from when the author was first struggling to establish her voice and place, to recent years when her celebrated status is cemented. As the fiction moves through different historical settings and locations, Morrison's representations of female bonds continue to surpass boundaries like age, class and race. In *A Mercy*, for example, she draws different interracial connections and shows how these relationships help sustain women, even if they do not prove permanent. In *Jazz* also, she portrays the formative female connection between Violet and Felice which transcends generational division. The life-defining bond between Heed and Christine is forged across a class divide in *Love*.

The primary bond between mother and daughter is a connection that Morrison addresses in all her works without exception. She often portrays failed mother-daughter relationships and explores how they can be substituted for and/or mended through wider female bonding. In addition, she unfolds the underlying social causes of limited, sometimes violent mother-daughter ties, which are usually the familial fracturing of slavery, black

economic disadvantage and the gender norms of a patriarchal society. As I have examined, close female friendships, some initiated in girlhood and some found between much older women, recur as well, as do poignant examples of ‘other mothering’ such as that of Lina towards Florens, and Connie and Baby Suggs towards their multiple respective charges.

Again and again Morrison returns to her preoccupation with relationships of solidarity or hostility among women. She depicts both sides of female homosociality in order to reveal the shortcomings and benefits of this connection in a woman’s life and in circumstances that often prompt its deprioritisation. She deals with a female bond that spans different time periods but which might be directed differently in different contexts. Nevertheless, Morrison herself prioritises woman to woman connections over any others, investing them with seriousness, complexity and primacy in her narratives.

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