Intimacy and Opposition of Females in the Community of Toni Morrison's Works

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Abstract: The nature of the opposition in Morrison’s fiction is more abstract and inclusive. The safe space of intimate relationships on the top level of community is still present, and even extended to include the more or less successful inter-gender community, but the true power of the oppositional efforts exists on the broader levels of community, within the town/-neighbourhood as well as on the abstract bottom level that involves collective memory and shared experience of oppression. The abstract concept of love is central to opposition on the most broad and inclusive level of community, but its definition varies according to the beholder. It is located somewhere in a web that extends from universal love and a desire for harmonious interaction between groups and individuals of different ways of thought to a destructive perception of love as inclusive within but not across racial and ideological barriers.

Keywords: Intimacy; Opposition; Female; Community

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1. Introduction

Community in its broadest definition is at the centre of Toni Morrison’s fiction. As we shall see, the thematic focus in her fiction centres on character interaction rather than on in-depth individual analysis. In other words, her characters can be fully understood only through an examination of their relationships. Many of Morrison’s female characters are forced to seek supportive communities outside of their
families and inter-gender relationships, while remaining within the top level of the community pyramid. Serving as alternative communities to the traditional axiomatic privilege of marriage and the nuclear family, these friendships provide more or less viable identity options for the female characters who seek support in their attempt to oppose conventional gender and beauty categories. Thus the author of this paper attempts to analyze the unique relationship of sisterhood and its functions in Toni Morrison’s communities.

2. African-American Community

This level of the pyramid constitutes a more tangible and grounded sense of community. Here we find the complex web of daily interactions, the community in the traditional sense the town. On this level, Morrison’s focus is deliberately narrow, by referring to this aspect of her own fiction as village literature, she stresses the importance of specificity as providing a setting that is narrow enough to emphasize the individuality of the characters as well as the complexity of their interactions. Morrison’s towns are generally all-black communities where white presence is peripheral or entirely absent but where white influence nevertheless seeps through the cracks. These communities are formed in opposition to the racial devaluation of larger society. However, as Morrison’s representation of segregated societies signalizes, these townships are not defined exclusively against white society, their origin may stem from the need for a safe space, but in everyday life the town communities constitute functioning entities that manage to provide their members with the possibility of asserting themselves as subjects rather than as objects despite the influence of white ideology. Morrison’s decision to represent all-black towns serves the very important point of avoiding idealization and indirect essentialism of African-Americans as a category. By creating self-segregated towns, she displaces whiteness as an absolute norm; most of the characters are obviously highly affected by white influence but the nature of the towns at least protects them from direct and tangible racist encounters. The all-black towns allow Morrison to move her discourse beyond the dichotomy of black/white and thus to portray a community in which hierarchy and social position are determined by multiple factors.
3. Female Friendships in All-black Towns

Morrison’s first female triad consists of China, Poland and Marie, the three Whores in *The Bluest Eye*. This triad has placed itself outside a society with rules and values by which its members refuse to live. The Whores represent a radically different way of life but it is not until Sula that Morrison’s female trinity offers an actual alternative to the traditional nuclear family. In *The Bluest Eye*, its function is more that of contrasting the ideals of the levels beneath it in the community pyramid. Across the borders of what is conventionally perceived as “correct”, Poland, China and Marie offer Pecola a strangely attractive alternative to her own grim version of the nuclear family as well as to Geraldine’s fear of funkiness. Safely positioned outside the broader levels of community, the Whores are not victims of conventionally rigid definitions of dichotomies, such as right/wrong and ugliness/beauty. In their house, Pecola finds funky and unrestricted laughter, unconditional acceptance, and a rare sense of stability—nothing can radically alter the rituals of this community’s initiated members. China, Poland and Marie offer Pecola a taste of continuity and love that unfamiliar to her. However, their community is more a utopian vision than a true alternative for Pecola. As we shall see in Morrison’s middle fiction, the more inclusive levels of community are preferable to an existence outside of society. The Whores’ function in the novel is to represent one of the paths of the oppositional gaze, one kind of resistance to the limiting ideologies of beauty, class and gender.

The community between the Mac Teer sisters is a more realistic alternative to Pecola’s emotional wasteland as it offers safe space without exclusion from the town community. Daughters of very different mothers, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia Mac-teer are to a high extent products of their environment. Pecola’s chances of forging a positive self-image are weakened by the internal conflicts on the narrow level of community, her family, and the indifference that informs the middle level, the town. Claudia, on the other hand, grows up in loving surroundings; her strength is supported by her parents but above all, it stems from the close relationship she has with her sister. Thrice displaced from power due to age, gender and colour of skin, the two girls form a community in which their individual thoughts and ideas matter. Within the frames of this community, their otherwise ‘peripheral existence’ becomes central. Together the Mac Teer sisters turn pain into productive rage as they dismember blue-eyed baby dolls and fight the Maureen Peals of the world. This closeness is reflected on a textual level in the pronoun ‘we’. Claudia’s use of first person plural gives the reader a strong sense of the girls collective identity in emphasizing community as a contrast to the isolation and loneliness that characterize the other characters in Morrison’s fiction.
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Related by blood, the friendship between the Mac Teer sisters is further strengthened by the weak power position they share. They know their place in the family hierarchy and have no choice but to follow the orders and endure the beatings by their parents. Their formation of a collective identity that does not limit the construction of individual ones allows the sisters to feel empowered and at least partly in control of their lives and their minds. Their community helps them to instil an oppositional gaze, which provides them with resistance against beauty ideals and multiple displacement and thus with the potential strength to form positive identities despite their triple burden of race, class, and gender.

In *Sula*, the idea of collective identity within female friendships becomes even more distinct and fulfilling in the community between Sula and Nel. “Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers”, the two girls find similarities behind their apparently opposite situations. Like the Mac Teer sisters, Nel and Sula are aware of their weak positions within the town hierarchy as well as within their family communities, their shared experience of oppression unites them. Nel and Sula both need the attention that their respective families fail to give them, and their friendship thus becomes the safe space necessary for individual and collective growth.

Like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula must look beyond the walls of her home for direction and support. Wild and in search of order, Sula finds herself strangely attracted to the neatness and control that Helene Wright’s house offers. Above all, however, she is drawn to Nel, with whom “the present was a constant sharing of perceptions”. With Nel, Sula finds a close community that can hold her dreams, that allows her freedom to fly but at the same time creates a safety net with Nel, she can be herself without explanation or apology.

Unlike Claudia and Frieda Mac Teer, Nel and Sula do not have potential female friendships within their families. With no siblings to share their multiple displacement, the two girls look to each other for support. Nel and Sula’s community is strong despite, or maybe rather because of, the profound differences between them. Whereas Sula encourages Nel to loosen the boundaries of her Perception of womanhood and embrace an identity that goes beyond serving a function in someone else’s life, Nel provides the sense of order and direction that Sula’s family lacks. In this respect, the friendship serves as a substitution for the qualities that their families as well as the town community fail to give them.

Sula and Ne grow apart as they are faced with adulthood and its implications of forging gender identities. When Nel marries Jude, Sula sets out on her journey to
make herself, and the tangible connection between the two friends breaks. However, the emotional link remains strong and to Nel Sula’s return is “like getting the use of an eye back”. Their friendship is put to the test when Sula sleeps with Jude but even that conflict is possible to overcome through the sharing of ideas and emotions. The community between Nel and Sula is strong throughout their lives and survives even in death as Sula thinks of her friend after she has made the transition of worlds.

The dyads of Nel and Sula in *Sula* and the Mac Teer sisters in *The Bluest Eye* form the frames for the intimate communities that serve as safety nets in the girls’ individual and collective identity formations. With their promise of unconditional love and acceptance. These communities create a safe space in which the girls can experiment with and ultimately shape positive senses of self. They have forged a collective identity that is strong enough to keep out the world when it becomes too hard to handle. Despite Claudia’s deep admiration for her older sister, her identity is never marginalized or absorbed by Frieda. This kind of collective identity is not restrictive. There is space for individual growth within the community, and despite Claudia’s tendency to idolize her sister, she resists the temptation of trying to “become” her. In *Beloved*, Morrison explores the risks of forging a collective identity but in her early novels, this kind of community is embraced as perhaps the only viable source of resistance to displacement based on class, gender or color of skin.

4. Intimacy and Disillusion

However, Morrison does not push the sustaining powers of intimate communities to the level of glorification. Despite Mrs Mac Teer’s song that makes pain sweet and the “love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup”, the Mac Teer sisters are not spared the devastating impact of the dominant culture. They, too, get blue-eyed baby dolls for Christmas and drink their white milk from Shirley Temple cups, and the love they have for each other-and even more importantly, for themselves-can only take them so far. Their supportive family and their own strong community guide them through their initiation into womanhood, but the threatening rule of white beauty ideology is a continuous pressure on black girls and women in Morrison’s fiction. The futility of the Mac Teer sisters struggle against white beauty ideals is echoed in their desperate but equally futile wish that Pecola’s baby will live-just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals, and as Burrows points out, the death of Pecola’s baby signals the impossibility of a truly positive future. When Claudia looks back on her childhood, she realizes that much of her earlier anger, which used to be the source of her op-
positional gaze, has succumbed to the perpetual impact of white society. Her words shatter our beliefs in her sustained resistance to her own devaluation: “We were still in love with ourselves then”.

However, Claudia’s family community has given her the strength to take action. Her anger has over time been directed into a voice that is strong enough to perform the recuperative act of storytelling. Unlike mad and silent Pecola, Claudia narrates the story that binds them together and thus comes to serve a therapeutic function for both of them. Claudia’s voice and her choice to share Pecola’s tragic story with the world reveal a glimpse of hope for the future. Claudia needs to tell the story because it does not belong only to Pecola; it belongs collectively to all the people who have failed to save her. Through her storytelling, Claudia acts as a “textual” therapist, she remembers the past and reflects critically on her own role in Pecola’s tragedy. In dealing with these “unspeakable” events, Claudia attempts to integrate her past in her present and her future—a healing act that reappears in all of Morrison’s fiction.

In Sula, we are also left with some hope for a better future. The strength that allows the connection between Nel and Sula to transcend the borders of life and death is echoed in Nel’s active act of forgiveness and reflection. As Nel recognizes her own responsibility for the traumas that both tore at and strengthened the bond between her and Sula, she recognizes and accepts her own complex self for the first time in years and the reunion provokes a primal-like scream. Finally, Nel has found her voice and her empowerment dissolves the grey ball of suppressed emotions that has followed her like a shadow since Jude and Sula left her. Perhaps we dare hope that she has managed to negotiate between rebellion and conformity and thus emotionally fused herself with Sula, an act which, according to Jane S. Bakeman, would create a “whole person”. Of course, no person is ever whole if we take the term to mean “perfect” or “complete”, since identity formation is a never-ending process without a fixed goal or destination. However, Nel’s recognition of the similarities that lie underneath a surface of radical opposition indicates that there is hope of achieving a sense of wholeness amidst the disruptions of change.
5. Conclusion

Morrison’s fictions may invoke various feelings in the reader, including feelings of anger and frustration that end in hope and disillusion intertwined. She depicts some of the most fundamentally damaging kinds of oppression, relating to race, gender and class and she never loses our attention. By operating on the most intimate level of community, Morrison manages to link collective and individual devaluation. If we do not understand the permeating influence of white beauty ideology, we most certainly understand it when we are presented with Pauline’s escape to the movie theatre or with her daughters heartbreaking wish for blue eyes. Morrison metonymically allows one family perceived ugliness to symbolize the devastating effects that the dominant Western culture’s idea of absolute beauty can have on, especially, African-American women.

In placing blame for Pecola’s failure to construct a positive sense of self in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison moves beyond an exclusive focus on white society. Recognizing the devastating effects of unreachable beauty standards, she nevertheless turns her critical eye on the town community as well. Unlaced itself by white society, the town community of Lorain look among its own members for pariahs, for people who can serve as embodiment of their own blackness and poverty; once objectified, unwanted features can be dismissed and with these pariahs as contrasts, the rest of the black community can enjoy a sense of superiority.

Morrison’s early representation of intimate communities and their influence on individual and collective identity formation is one of both hope and disillusion. The characters who inhabit these early novels are searching for a sense of wholeness, but they rarely reach their goal. The consequent disillusion isolates them from each other, and their individual isolation prevents them from voicing their desires. The few truly supportive communities are located on the narrow intimate level of community, in Morrison’s female dyads and triads, but many of them fail to provide a sustained sense of self-acceptance. The development of sustained oppositional gazes is rare in her early fiction, a fact that occasions a sense of disillusion at times. However, even if they are few and far apart, the presence of these “looks of resistance” in itself leaves us on a note of hope.
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