

## **Ruth in Ruthlessly Sexist Society: Reflections on Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I have taken Morrison's third novel Song of Solomon to discuss the sufferings of a black woman in a patriarchal family. Morrison presents that Black women suffers in different forms in different stages of her life. This novel portrays how a black woman is influenced by different persons especially with in her own family. The male domination suppresses women in all directions. Women never gets chance to think about their condition. Women seem to be dependent on men but actually men depend on women for their needs. But in this process men make women as slaves to them. Women become objects to fulfil the needs of men. In Song of Solomon, the main character's mother is Ruth Foster Dead. She is influenced by her father, husband, and son. These three persons use her like an object. She serves them according to their wishes and forgets about herself. Due to their high influence on her, she becomes the follower of them and also a shadow to them. The blind following makes her life dull and monotonous. Finally she becomes a puppet in the hands of sexist society.

**KEYWORDS:** Patriarchy, humiliation, identity, self, ideologies, status, reality, artificial, oppression, sacrifice, influence.

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### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison is an outstanding writer in Afro-American literature. Her novels depict the lives of black people and their sufferings. As a woman writer, her focus is obviously on black women's struggle in the bourgeois society. Black women have to face triple oppression: race, class and gender. Although Black liberation and Civil rights movement in America have given freedom to black people, the deeply rooted practices-racism, classism and sexism, are still disturbing their lives. The disturbance is more in women's lives than men's.

Black women are treated as inferior to white men, white women and black men in American society. Black women are humiliated not only by Whites but also by Blacks. This humiliation takes place in different forms in different stages of black women's lives. As a daughter, wife and mother, she is mutilated and her self become the shadow of the other. She completely depends on others. She is meant for others and she sacrifices her self for others.

### **Literary Review**

Morrison, in her first two novels, The Bluest Eye and Sula presents female characters as main characters. In her third novel Song of Solomon, she creates a male character as main character. Song of Solomon is a story of Milkman Dead, who searches for his ancestral roots and finds his identity. Morrison develops this character from a selfless

person to an identified self. Milkman successfully gets his identity at the end of the novel. Milkman is able to get his identity because he is a man.

Milkman's mother is Ruth Foster Dead. As a woman, Ruth fails to get identity due to chains of patriarchy and lack of love. Like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula Peace in *Sula*, Ruth also faces identity crisis. The main idea of sketching this character is to present the sufferings of black women within their own family. Ruth's role is nothing other than providing the needs for others especially for men in her family.

Morrison creates Ruth's character to present that a black woman's self is the other's shadow and she is bounded with the ideologies of men. Throughout her life, Ruth depends on her father, husband and son. She craves for them and finds the essence of her life with them. Though she seems to be a dependent character, she is made to be dependent by these three characters. Morrison clearly exemplifies male domination over women in this novel.

The first influential person on Ruth is her father, Dr.Foster. He is the first Afro-American doctor in the society. He is considered superior to all other black men due to his wealth. To maintain his class status, Dr.Foster makes Ruth to believe that she is superior to all other black women in the city. She behaves in such a manner that her living style should match with the high-middle class standards. She never crosses her father's principles. To follow those principles, she distances herself from other black people in the society.

According to Dr.Foster, Ruth is like other material objects in his house. How he takes care of these materials, in the same manner he takes care of Ruth. Dr. Foster wants to maintain a functional family which is quite rare for blacks in the society. This rare quality brings only care for Ruth and not an identity. Morrison, in her first two novels presents that the protagonists suffer due to lack of care from the parents. In this novel, care is there but it is an artificial one. It distances Ruth from natural life and slowly a sense of alienation develops in Ruth. She explains her childhood isolation to her son, Milkman.

I am a small woman. I don't mean little; I mean small, and 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 dresses and my white silk stocking. But I didn't think I'd even need a friend because I had him. .... The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died. .... He was not good man, certainly he was an arrogant man, and often a foolish and destructive one. ... it was important for me to be in his presence, among his things, the things he used, had touched (Morrison 212).

Ruth is a representation of her father's class. She does not have any special identity other than her father's daughter. In School and social gatherings, people do not identify her as Ruth. She is recognized as Dr.Foster's daughter. She proudly says that "I certainly am my daddy's daughter"(Morrison 120). This is only a false pride. She is made by her father to strongly believe that she is nothing other than a daughter of Dr.Foster. Ruth is best exemplified as a highly influential person under patriarchal system.

As J. Brooks Bousan says that Ruth is "Constructed as a figure of apparent middle-class respectability, Ruth is an ultra refined woman whose life is shaped—and disciplined—by

hegemonic ideologies of proper femininity and domesticity”(63). This is absolutely right; Ruth’s character is framed according to the principles of her father. She is the follower of her father, Dr.Foster who “... chains her to the power of patriarchy, materialism, and assimilation into the dominant culture of racism”(Judy Pocock 174). Black women are again bounded to male domination as slaves and they are restricted to enjoy the freedom.

Ruth’s self is masked with the ideologies of her father. Though she knows that she is suppressed, she could not try to come out of that oppression. She feels that her father’s ideologies are natural and so is always loyal to them. This devotion makes Ruth powerless, she never thinks about the ways to overcome the oppression.

The second influential person on Ruth is her husband, Macon Dead. Macon Dead marries Ruth, only to improve his status in the society by getting her father’s wealth. After marriage Ruth’s position becomes worse. When she is at her father’s house, her father’s high middle class status keeps her away from the effects of classism. Her family’s high middle class status never reminds her about race and class. When she is at her father’s house she is a victim of only gender oppression. After marriage, when her husband moves to Doctor’s house, first time she feels that her oppression is the result of her race.

The marital relation between Macon and Ruth is only an adjustment and there is no love between them. Macon’s class status in the society does not meet the needs of Ruth, like her desire for love and sex. Macon treats her as an object (Though her father also treats her as an object but care is there) and does not want to maintain any relation with her. “His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her” (Morrison 30). Macon’s behaviour humiliates Ruth, due to this “... she had been rendered invisible and inconsequential” (Patrick Bryce Bjork 39). Macon’s negligence questions the existence of Ruth in her own house.

Ruth leads her life without love, affection and care. She is also one of the things in the house. She is only a representation of a wife for a functional family in the patriarchal society. She follows it as a blind person. The blind following brings monotony to her life. She “... began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt”(Morrison 31). Ruth has a stony existence which cannot be moved unless and until it receives an action from a living thing.

The stillness is the best example for her oppressive condition. Though she is small at her father’s house, there is some liveliness and hope for future. Morrison uses watermark symbol to differentiate the condition of Ruth at her father’s house and her husband’s house. At her father’s house, the water mark “... was the summation of the affectionate elegance” (Morrison 32). Her father’s love and affection are connected with this water mark during her childhood.

After marriage, water mark signifies differently. Ruth sees the watermark “Like a light house keeper drawn to his window to gaze once again at the sea, or a prisoner automatically searching out the sun as he steps into the yard for his hour of exercise, Ruth looked for the water mark several times during day” (Morrison 31). Once the water mark is associated with love and affection and now it is a checkpoint for the reality. Water

mark is a satisfactory object for Ruth in the house than all other things. Because this reminds her that she is alive and not dead.

One day when this water mark is exposed on the table and it becomes a stain. Morrison use of stain for exposed water mark is remarked by J.Brooks Bouson. He says that “Ruth’s obsession with her stained table, then signals her own status anxiety-her own internalization of a deep sense of familial and racial shame” (64). From this remark, it is clearly understood that due to lack of love from her husband, Ruth feels ashamed of her race and gender. She never thinks about this till she gets love from her father. Her father’s excessive love makes Ruth to develop an obsession towards him.

Her husband, instead of trying to bring Ruth from her father’s influence, he maintains distance from her. He feels that they have incest relation. Some critics remarks that the relation between Ruth and her father is Electro complex. This may be true because her behaviour at her father’s death bed implies their incest relation. She lies beside her father with naked body and sucks her father’s finger. Macon sees this and completely avoids her. Due to Macon’s negligence, Ruth “... has withdrawn into a fantasy world seeking comfort in sleeping on her father’s grave and nursing her son until he is eight years old” (Patrick Bryce Bjork 36). Macon is responsible for Ruth’s strange behaviour.

Due to Macon’s obscure nature, Ruth’s life becomes miserable and also unbearable to her. Every day she looks at the watermark on the table to acknowledge “... that the world was still there, that this was life and not a dream” (Morrison 32). She cannot bare this stillness for more days. To come out of her numb existence, Ruth searches for alternatives. Then she finds her son, Milkman. Ruth chooses him because he is a small boy and can be managed according to her own wishes.

Ruth feels that she is loved by her father very much. She misses love from her husband. She searches for love in her son. She finds this love by nursing him too many years. When she nurses Milkman, “She felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy” (Morrison 35). Whatever the feeling or emotion that she misses from her husband she finds that with her son. The emotional bond with her son is only from one side. As Milkman is a small boy he cannot respond to her mother’s emotions. Milkman is “...her personal effrontery to a world that has given her neither love nor purpose” (Patrick Bryce Bjork 39). Milkman becomes a “velveteened toy” (Morrison 225) in the hands of Ruth.

Ruth’s consideration of Milkman as toy signifies that she is highly influenced by her father’s and husband’s class consciousness. As these two persons find pleasure in material objects,(Ruth is also an object) she considers Milkman a toy and starts finding pleasure with that toy. When Milkman becomes a man, he becomes a “separate real person” (Morrison 223) to her. From the beginning of the novel, Ruth’s life is made an artificial. As soon as Milkman becomes real person automatically Ruth is away from him.

Not only Ruth but also Milkman distances himself from his mother. After knowing that her mother nurses him too old, he doubts about his mother’s character and starts avoiding her. Like all other men in the society, Milkman also has standard opinion about women that they have weak personality. As her mother is also a woman she is also a “... frail

woman content to do tiny things” (Morrison 115). As a woman she can do only small things and only a helpful object to satisfy the needs of men.

This is further exemplified by giving Trudier Harris remark about Ruth’s relation with Milkman. His opinion is, “In order to keep Milkman alive, she must intensify her role as mother, only to relinquish it forever when he becomes an adolescent” (23). Milkman needs only nursing from his mother. As soon as his needs are satisfied, he does not have any use with his mother. Ruth’s life is slowly faded to the background and Milkman rises to front. She has to sacrifice her life for Milkman’s identity.

When Ruth explains Milkman about her father’s and husband’s oppression, he does not try to understand it. He starts thinking about his feelings towards his mother. He also “... never loved his mother because she was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love” (Morrison 132). Milkman inherits male domination from his father. He does not know how to love his mother. He blames Ruth that she is not a worthy woman to receive love from him. Morrison’s use of insubstantial and shadowy signifies many meanings. Black women are made weak by patriarchal principles. Patriarchy’s shadow covers the entire life of a black woman.

After observing the relation of Ruth with three influential men in her life, as an Indian scholar, it strikes the mind about Manu’s statement about women in his Manusmriti. He says that women are never fit for independence. She has to depend on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth and on her son in old age. This perfectly suits to Ruth. She depends on father, husband and son in her life. She is a doll to her father, “trophy wife” (J Brooks Bouson 63) to her husband and a midget to her son. These three persons view her only as an object and use her according to their own wishes. She too depends on them for her needs. Sometimes she feels that her needs are fulfilled but it is only a false belief. Finally Ruth is a victim in the hands of sexist society.

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