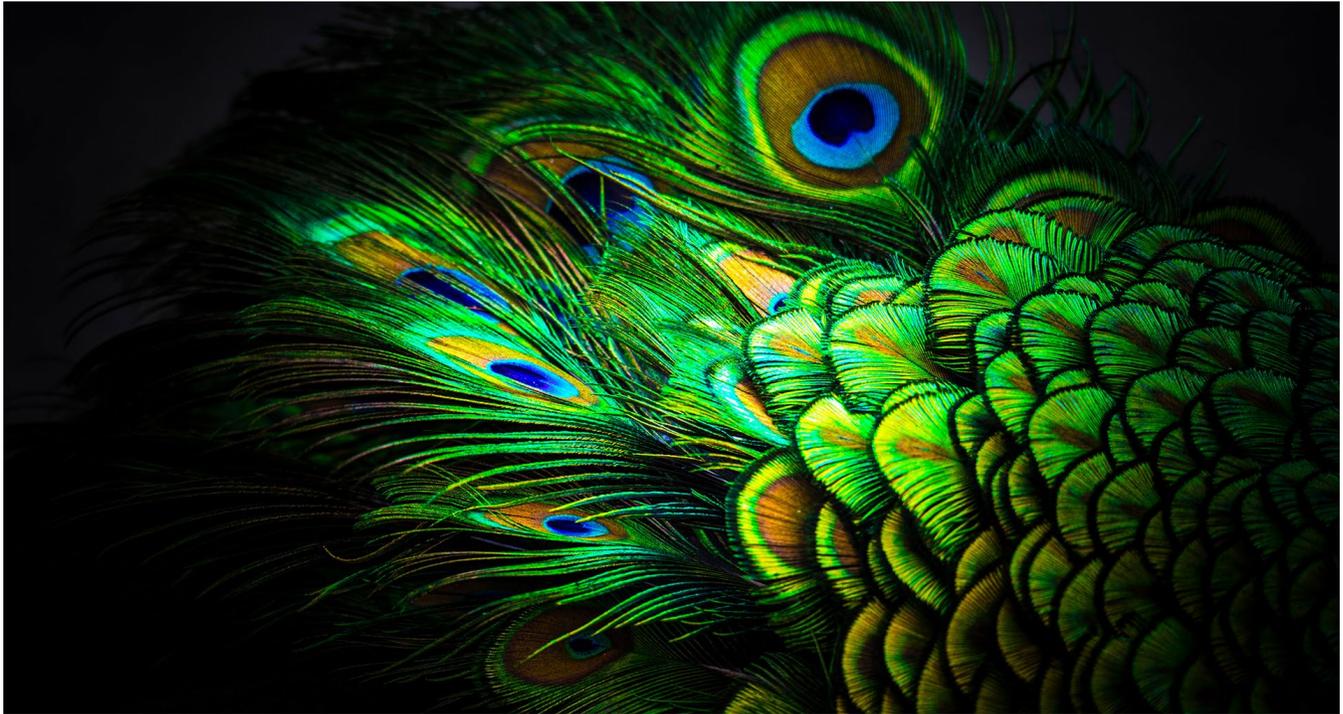


# BEYOND THE BODY: BLACK MEN PERPETRATORS AND WOMEN'S RESISTANCE IN TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON

by Houda Hamdi

Body Studies, vol. 2, no. 4 (2020): 29-39



## Abstract

*Taking as its main corpus Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, this article portrays the process by which Black male characters construct their identities. In so doing, I focus on the metaphorical image of the peacock, which refers to male domination and the subjugation of women in a phallogocentric society wherein they are reduced to bodies to be looked at, to be used, and abused. As an African American woman writer, Morrison rejects the portrayal of Black women as victims*

*of patriarchy. Instead, despite their apparent subjugation, Black female characters in Song of Solomon transcend the body image and are portrayed as the symbol of love consciousness, the Phallus without which man's sexual identity would be inexistent. Black women are tricksters and figures of transgression who subvert race, gender and class paradigms.*



**BODY STUDIES JOURNAL**

A peer-reviewed open access journal for the interdisciplinary field of Body Studies

**BODYSTUDIESJOURNAL.ORG**

Copyright © 2020 Body Studies Journal  
Cabrini University • ISSN-2642-9772

## Text

As an African American writer, Toni Morrison, in most of her novels, engages in topics related not only to the issue of race, but also to the position of Black women in a patriarchal society. Aware of the double-marginalization of Black women, Morrison, is a perfect example of a Black woman novelist who, to use Mae G Henderson's terms, "speaks in tongues" (6). Put differently, she makes both race and gender the quintessential themes of her writings. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison portrays how male-dominated cultures work through the subjugation and the domination of the female body as a means for the male subject to assert the illusion of his masculine identity. The novel functions as a narrative portraying the development of the masculine self through the objectification of the feminine Other. As a subversive writer, Morrison does not stop short at exploring the dynamics of patriarchy. She portrays her female Black subjects as transgressive agents who subvert racial, sexist, and social paradigms through both hidden and public modes of resistance.

In this article, I analyze the phallogocentric dynamics between male characters, Macon Dead and his son, Milkman, and the female characters, Macon Dead's wife, Ruth, his daughters, Lena and Corinthians, and Hagar, Milkman's cousin and girlfriend. I show that despite the apparent subjugation of all these women under the controlling gaze of the patriarchal power, these characters, nevertheless, have a voice and an unsettling agency to subvert from within the patriarchal and racialized world which has long confined their bodies and thoughts.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses the metaphor of the peacock, an image which, among other interpretations, reflects the world of patriarchal domination. The term orally implies how women are peed upon by the cock, man's phallus. From Guitar's perspective, the peacock is described as "a male bird with too much tail.... weighing it down" (178). Reference to the sex and the tail of the animal further supplements this animal imagery with the theme of patriarchy. As a peacock, Macon Dead is

described as a spiritually dead person whose obsession with owning property and accumulating wealth makes him not only detached from his Black community, but also from the women who surround him. As his family name connotes, Macon Dead is portrayed as a loveless person. His sexual life is emotionally sterile and restricted to his foreplay in acts of "untying," "unclasping," "unbuckling the snaps and strings of what must have been the most beautiful, the most delicate, the whitest and softest underwear on earth" (16). During these undressings, Macon is delighted with toying with each eye of his wife's corset and with unlacing "each grosgrain ribbon that threaded its pale-blue way through the snowy top" of Ruth's naked body (16). Macon and his wife never spoke to each other, but "they giggled occasionally, and as when children play 'doctor,' undressing of course was the best part" (16).

In this scene, Morrison excavates the relation of the body to gender performance. Macon toys with his wife's delicate garments. He unties them, unclasps them, unbuckles them, unlaces them, and unthreads them so that, after having sex, Ruth ties them, clasps them, buckles them, laces them and threads them back again. The scene plays on the terms of doing and undoing Ruth's clothes in order to evoke the idea of the repetition of acts and how gender, using Judith Butler's words, is a matter of ritualistic performances of discursively gendered discourses through the medium of the body (177). As the novel progresses, Macon, then, ceases to look at his wife, but what he misses is her underwear (16), which remains the object on which he exerts his ritualistic sexual acts that consolidates his manhood.

As a peacock, Macon not only sees his wife as a sexual body, but he also abuses her emotionally. "Ruth . . . began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it" (10-11). When her father, the first Black doctor in Michigan, refused to lend Macon the money to buy the Erie Lackawanna estate, Macon felt that he was betrayed by his own wife who reflects the image of the doctor. Ruth, then, becomes the object of his own frustration to the point that he interprets her relationship with her dying



father to be an incestuous and necrophiliac one: "In the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him" (73), Macon tells his son, Milkman. "Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (73). Macon's frustration at the lost land not only entailed his misinterpretation of the death scene of the doctor, but also his suspicion of the fact that his eldest children, Corinthians and Magdalene called Lena, were the fruit of "nasty" molestation since they were delivered by Ruth's own father, because, in Macon's words, "there's a lot of things a man can do to please a woman, even if he doesn't fuck" (74). As a substitution for marital love, Ruth transfers her emotional depravity to her son by breastfeeding him long after the time he needed.

Macon's daughters, in turn, cannot escape their father's patriarchal domination. Macon keeps each member of his family awkward with fear: "His hatred for his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices" (11). Under his frozen glance "they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama that he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves" (11-12). Lena and Corinthians are not only terrorized by the rigidity of their father, they are also objectified. Because race and class overlap, Macon uses them along with his luxurious Hudson car as objects, an extension of his property, to show off in front of the Black Michigan community, in order to distance himself socially from it. In Jessica Gama's interpretation, "Macon ...had children predominantly to parade them around like accessories" (50). Fixing his gaze upon their upper middleclass clothing, Lena and Corinthians, like their mother, are bodily images: "they were all dressed up near his car, in white stocking, ribbons, and gloves" (216). They stood apart from the sweating Black men, "sucking ice out of [their] handkerchiefs. Away from the Black neighbourhood's children who are "barefoot," "naked to the waist, dirty"

(216). Macon just glances at his car and at his own daughters because they are the objects of the other Black men's gaze and envy (216).

Macon Dead and Ruth's son, Milkman, also epitomizes the animal registry of the peacock. As a product of his patriarchal household, Milkman internalized his father's machoistic perception of women. In a fashion reminiscent of Macon Dead, Milkman engages in objectifying his beloved cousin, Hagar, the granddaughter of Pilate, his aunt. Like Macon, Milkman sees women in a voyeuristic way. Although Hagar was five years older than him and she "was as strong and muscular as he was" (45), Milkman, metonymically, reduces her to the image of the behind. When he met Hagar for the first time, all Milkman could see was "the bent back of a girl" (43). It seemed to Milkman that he had no need to see her face, because "he had already fallen in love with her behind" (43). If Macon reduces Ruth to the image of the delicate underwear, Milkman reduces Hagar to the image of "the beautiful behind." As a peacock which cannot fly, Milkman cannot perceive women in a picture other than that of his sexist father. For Milkman, Hagar is a sexually disposable property. She is "his private hot pot, not a real and legitimate girlfriend—not someone he might marry" (91). After more than a dozen years, Hagar ceases, then, to be the object of his erotic drive: "Her eccentricities were no longer provocative and the stupefying ease with which he had gotten and stayed between her legs had changed from the great good fortune to annoyance" (91). Sex with Hagar "was so free, so abundant, it had lost its fervor and excitement" (91) to the point that she became Milkman's third beer (91) because it is always there.

Milkman decides to break up. He writes her a "thank you" note enclosed with money as a means of ending their relationship. In so doing, Milkman exchanges money as a payoff for the denied love. After the break-up, Hagar saw him with another woman whose "silky copper hair" and "gray eyes," drove her out of her mind. Subsequently, she becomes a "restless ghost, finding peace nowhere and in nothing" (127), a stalker, and a potential killer, trying to kill Milkman several times but to no avail. As Milkman lies in Guitar's apartment,



unmoving, Hagar approaches with a knife. She knows that she can no longer evoke any emotion from him, nor the pity she deserves. Milkman notices her presence. He sarcastically taunts her by suggesting that she hurt herself: "If you keep your hands just that way and then bring them down straight and fast, you can drive that knife right smack in your cunt," Milkman claims. "Why don't you do that? Then all your problems will be over" (130). Upon noticing her inability to react, Milkman felt proud and triumphant for "she had proved, so far, to be the world's most inept killer" (129). He "patted her cheek and turned away from her wide, dark, pleading, hollow eyes" (131). Milkman thoroughly mocks Hagar's love and her subsequent madness. Because of the failure of her revenge, Hagar made Milkman a "star," "a celebrity" among the Black community and "one bad dude" who had the power to destroy a woman, simply because "he had fucked her and she was driven wild by the absence of his magnificent joint" (301), .

In an intersubjective way, Milkman, like his father, needs the image of women as inferior beings in order to consolidate his "strong" male identity. Hagar, like Milkman's subjugated sisters and mother, functions, in a manner that Virginia Woolf characterizes as a "looking-glass possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (45). Women are constructed as mirrors for men's phantasms of their self-amplifying desire (Butler 18). Without the constructed image of women, men's constructed power and agency would be inexistent. As Woolf further points out, "[t]he looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and man may die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine" (47). The role of women as both the absence and presence of the phallus is similar to Hegel's philosophical insights into master-slave dialectics. The master's recognition or self-consciousness comes only through the presence of the slave to consolidate his image as a free master man (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 117). Viewed through this lens, Hagar is the mirror without whom Milkman would fail to prove himself to be a man within the Black community.

Extending this theme of the fictive formation of male subjecthood even further, Judith Butler, in her *Gender Trouble*, extrapolates on male theoretical traditions of Freud's Oedipal complex and Lacan's "Symbolic Stage" to claim that women are the Phallus, because their presence as the phallic lack is the only reference point that illusively reaffirms man's sexual identity as the phallic beholder. As she puts it, "For women to be the phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the phallus, to signify that power, to embody the phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through being its Other, its absence, its lacks, the dialectical confirmation of its identity" (56). Butler further asserts that "by claiming that the Other that lacks the Phallus is the one who is the Phallus, Lacan clearly suggests that power is wielded by this feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who 'has' the Phallus requires the other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its 'extended' sense" (58). The role of the woman in a heterosexual discourse is both the absence and presence of the Phallus, where her phallic lack becomes the being of the phallus as her role is to consolidate the masculine identity and man's self-affirmation (57). Butler's subversive analysis that women are the Phallus is relevant to Morrison's portrayal of Hagar. Hagar who has no phallus becomes in her phallic lack the very presence of the Phallus in consolidating and mirroring the fictive masculinity of Milkman.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman is accountable for the psychological breakdown of his cousin. Hagar has become obsessed and "nothing could pull her mind away from the mouth Milkman was not kissing, the feet that were not running toward him, the eye that no longer beheld him, the hands that were not touching him" (127). Hagar grows violent and wild. She "toyed with her unsucked breasts, but at some point her lethargy dissipated of its own accord and in its place was wilderness, the focused meanness of a flood or an avalanche of snow which only observers, flying in a rescue helicopter, believed to be an indifferent natural phenomenon, but which the victims, in their last gulp of breath, knew was both directed and personal" (128). Hagar's agitation is the outcome of



passion, anger, jealousy, and “loss of face.” Her erratic behavior recalls Susan Bordo’s studies on the protesting female body and violence in some texts written by women. In “Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,” Bordo writes:

In hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, then, the woman’s body may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form. They are written, of course, in languages of horrible suffering. It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the corner, waiting at the horizon of ‘normal’ femininity. It is no wonder that a steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied protest, unconscious, inchoate, and counter-productive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless. (2369)

Bordo assumes that even if the bodily-manifested protest of women against patriarchy is non-productive, the act itself remains an attempt to destroy the patriarchal dictates that subordinate women. Bordo’s insights provide a vehicle for interpreting Hagar’s “semiotic” protest. Her violent reaction reflects the language of the body stripped of its symbolic order and makes her more entangled in the phallogocentric order that dominates her. Subsequently, she internalized the Eurocentric standards and ideals of feminine beauty.

Hagar desires to transform herself physically in order to look like Milkman’s new girlfriend. She spends all of her money on new clothes because “everything is a mess” (310). “No wonder ... Milkman likes silky and penny-colored hair” (315), she complains redundantly. Hagar believes that Milkman rejects her because “he likes lemon-colored skin” and “gray- blue eyes” (316). Like Ruth, whose sexual life is restricted to performing the role of a submissive middle-class wife through dressing and undressing, and like her daughters, who are “displayed” and “splayed,” Hagar, in the same vein, further inserts herself into a world of hyperfeminized appearance. She

becomes obsessed with cosmetics. She “believed she could spend her life there among the cut glass, shimmering in peaches and cream, in satin. In opulence. In luxe. In love” (311). Hagar is obsessed with all these commercial objects which refer to the mainstream commercial culture which “defines female beauty as white and pampered” (Walther 78).

Hagar’s corporal internalization of the voyeuristic perception of women in a male dominated discourse translates the fact that body is a medium of culture. Quoting from the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, Susan Bordo argues that the body is “a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which cultural rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments are inscribed and reinscribed” (2362). The body, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s stance, is an immediate locus of social control and domination. “The body is in the social world and the social world is in the body” (Bourdieu “An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology” 26). Culture, with all its social institutions, has a conscious and unconscious impact on the behaviour of the individuals. Their manners, style, and customs are all manifestations of the cultures they occupy. As a result, individuals become the “habitus” (“Structure” 163). Subsequently, human beings are mere discursive embodiment of their cultures. As Bourdieu further contends, “Through table manners, routine habits, rules and practices,” culture is “made body,” “converted into automatic, habitual activity” (Bourdieu “Outline of a Theory of Practice” 94). The body becomes a “docile” entity, to use Foucault’s terms, since it is regulated by specific cultural norms (*Discipline and Punish* 135). Bourdieu and Foucault’s analysis of the subject in relation to body and culture is relevant to Morrison’s characterization of Hagar. In a patriarchal discourse, Hagar becomes the gendered “docile body” in reducing herself to a mere “to-be-looked-at” woman, the object of the male gaze. All what she looks for is Milkman’s attention through bodily transformation and improvement. In so doing, she reflects those female “docile bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjugation, transformation and improvement” (“Unbearable Weight” 2363). As a docile body, Hagar succumbs to “the exacting and normalizing feminine discipline” of



makeup, high heels, girdles and dress, which at the farthest extremes “may lead to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death” (2363).

Morrison herself insists that “the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world” (“Behind” 89). Indeed, Hagar dies tragically. For some critics, her physical death illustrates, literally, the damage of the inscription of the racist and patriarchal discourse on her “suffering” body. Leslie Goss Erickson stipulates that “Milkman’s rejection is a heroic call to move toward her individuation. Instead of summoning her strength and individuality to answer the call for her heroic journey that transcends race and patriarchy, Hagar sinks even more deeply into the ideology of the society which rejects and objectifies her” (82). Michael Awkward notes that “Hagar’s journey to reification and, ultimately, physical death has its source in her adoption of a patriarchal society’s almost timeless figuration of a woman as object, in her futile attempt to achieve the bourgeois society’s notions of female beauty” (492). In O’Reilly’s words, “Had Hagar grown to maturity in a rural village, she would indeed have been raised among a community of black women who would have instilled in her pride for her black female self” (83).

Hagar’s characterization, perceived by Erickson, Awkward, and O’Reilly, is inconclusive. As an African American writer, Morrison refuses to reduce women to the image of victims. The disintegration of Hagar and her subsequent death function as a narrative, albeit tragic, which mirrors Milkman’s failure to liberate himself from the racial, class and gender dictates of his father. It is true that Hagar succumbs to the patriarchal discourse that shapes her own perception of a woman who is incomplete without the presence of a man. However, her immersion in the capitalistic and phallogocentric ideology of her society is also meant to accentuate Milkman’s deracinated identity. By applying insights from feminist and other theorists of body studies, Hagar can be seen to function as a double metaphor for race and gender. She functions as a mirror or, to use Virginia Wolfe’s term, “a looking-glass” to further illustrate Milkman’s distance from

his own Black race. Through Hagar, Milkman becomes a performing white subject to the point that her attempt at winning him back necessitated her internalization of the racial white discourse that does not match with her own Black cultural background. Hagar echoes the character of Pecola Breedlove in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Yet, if Pecola’s internalized racism stems from the racial exclusion of the white culture she lives in, Hagar’s internalized racism comes directly from her Black cousin who makes her question the perception of beauty in highly racialized terms.

Contrary to O’Reilly’s analysis of this character, Hagar is not a deracinated woman. Her frenzied behaviour and ultimate death further ingrain her in her own Black legacy. Hagar encapsulates the wilderness of the Southside: “Not the poverty or dirt or noise, not just extreme unregulated passion where even love found its way with an ice pick, but the absence of control . . . not the wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds, but wild wilderness where there was none” (138). The wild passion that transcends barriers, ultimately leads Hagar to her own death. Hagar’s physical omission from the text is twofold: Because she was the body to be sexually gazed upon, used and abused, death disembodies Hagar and liberates her from racial and sexist discourses which had claim on her body. Hagar becomes the disembodied ghost who haunts the novel. Instead of a mere body, she becomes the spectre who thematizes love consciousness and highlights Milkman as the “unfeeler” and the dead, as his name symbolically suggests.

The novel plays on appearance versus reality. At the age of twenty-one, Milkman slaps his father for hitting his mother. Following this event, he narrates a dream to his friend Guitar wherein he constructs Ruth as a frail woman who was engulfed by bloody tulips[1]. In his dream, Ruth seems to smile at them as if they were “harmless butterflies” (105). Ruth’s association with nature further objectifies her identity[2]. In Milkman’s mind, Ruth has no agency and needs her own son to protect her from her brutal husband. But Morrison’s text unsettles this image. For, as Ruth grows older, she is described as “fierce in the presence of death” and “heroic even” (64). Instead of



fearing death, “its threat gave her direction, clarity, and audacity” (64). Milkman’s construction of his mother is juxtaposed with that of Corinthians. If Milkman associates Ruth with nature to account for her vulnerability in order to legitimize his patronizing act, Corinthians sees her as a strong woman and a trickster, who, at the surface level, gives the impression that she is harmless, but at a deeper level, she is capable “to bring her husband to a point, not of power, but of helplessness” (64).

Ruth talks about her humiliation in the wedding of Anna Djvorak’s son, an old Hungarian woman who had been a patient of Ruth’s father. She tells about her conversation with the Catholic priest on communion. As a Methodist, Ruth, apparently, does not know that Catholics can take communion only in Catholic churches. Macon criticizes her for being “a silly woman,” whose ignorance humiliated her in front of the white guests. But Ruth insists that she is not. Macon further insults her: He asserts that “she ain’t nobody” in the eyes of the white people, and that she was present in the wedding because she was simply the daughter of Dr. Foster. Knowing that her husband despises her father, Ruth, in a cold-blooded tone and with pride, asserts that she is indeed her “daddy’s daughter” (67) in order to frustrate him. Ruth is not, as Milkman thinks, “insubstantial,” and a woman who lacks “a vicious vocabulary and a fast lip” (75). Ruth has the power to provoke her husband’s anger, which is expressed in violence, to ridicule him and to prove that, as a weak person, he is incapable of communicating, peacefully, in words, as a decent person.

Ruth proves to have an agency to defy the degrading patriarchal world in words and actions. Although she is inhibited from visiting her father’s grave, Ruth defies Macon’s rules and finds solace in the silent cemetery to talk and express herself to the man who was the only one who really cared for her. Ruth is not afraid of death. Morrison metaphorically associates death and “the grave” with Macon Dead’s symbolic name, his patriarchal world, which annihilates the agency of the Dead women. Death does not illustrate the annihilation of Ruth, as Philip Page has argued (60). On the contrary, death empowers Ruth and gives her “direction, clarity,

and audacity” (64) which helps her talk back to her brutal husband, and secretly ritualize her nightly visits to her deceased father.

As an African American woman writer, Morrison portrays her Black female characters as “subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival” (Mori 30). Morrison’s women have the power to achieve an identity which exists outside the paradigms of race, class and gender. Hagar, despite her death, remains the voice of love. Ruth’s confinement in the patriarchal world of Macon Dead gives her strength and audacity to confront the tiny space through the role of a trickster. Following a severe depression, Corinthians Dead steps out of her father’s house to achieve an autonomous identity, which unsettles Macon’s obsession with the Black upper middle-class status. Corinthians, like her own mother, understood that she has “to get out of the house” (189). Like her mother, Corinthians becomes a manipulator. As a maid, she made of her job a secret through playing the role of a trickster: First, she lied about her job: She tells her family that she was working as “Michael-Mary Graham’s amanuensis.” Also, she makes use of her upper middle-class appearance in order to disguise: “She avoided the other maids on the streets, and those whom she saw regularly on the bus assumed that she had some higher household position than theirs since she came to work in high-heeled shoes” (189). In so doing, Corinthians makes these women believe that “only a woman who didn’t have to be on her feet all day could stand the pressure of heels on the long ride home” (190-91). Rather than making artificial velvet roses and being, “like a child” (190), dependent on the money of her father, Corinthians’ secret job allows her to be financially independent, responsible, and capable of creating a world of her own “to shape her time and activities carefully in order to meet the heavy demands of artistic responsibility” (191).

Corinthians defies not only her father’s patriarchal control and his obsession with social status; she also negotiates her position as a maid even within her mistress’s territory: Knowing that Miss Graham uses her because of her upper middle-class status, Corinthians lies to her. “She



never let her know that she had ever been to college or Europe" (191). Upon noticing that her maid can read and that she "seemed to be acquainted with some of the great masters of literature" (191), Miss Graham gave Corinthians less work to do, and integrated her in her intellectual circles of local poets, painters, musicians and writers. What Corinthians did is double-folded: She uses her upper middle-class appearance in order to disguise and keep her work a secret, and to subvert Miss Graham's racial construction of her identity, which reduced her to be a maid, in order to be an amanuensis. In so doing, Corinthians, as a trickster, builds her agency in defiance to race, class and gender. Corinthians' job allows her to meet other people. Her encounter with Henry Porter, one of Macon Dead's tenants on the South side of Michigan Street, adds to her secret life. Henry is poor. As opposed to her fancy clothes and education, Corinthians notices that he "was ill-dressed" (192). If Corinthians' class status makes her detached from the Black community and its priorities, Henry, on the other hand, is secretly involved in the organization of the "Seven Days," a cell that kills white people when Blacks are assassinated in order to restore a "balance," "a ratio" (158).

Corinthians "knew she was ashamed of him, that she would have to add him to the other secret, the nature of her work, that he could never set foot in her house" (194). Because they come from distinct backgrounds, Corinthians and Henry's relationship culminates in a dispute which, ultimately, propels her desire to further free herself from the sophistication of her Black middle-class life: "Corinthians Dead, the daughter of the wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster, granddaughter of the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster, who had been the second man in the city to have a two-horse carriage, and a woman who had turned heads on every deck of the Queen Mary and had French men salivating all over Paris" (197), is now banging on the window of Henry, a yardman, to escape forever from the velvet (198), her womanly middle-class performance, which Morrison compares to "a smothering death of dry roses" (199). If Macon Dead "displayed" and "splayed" her, with Henry, Corinthians feels "bathed," "scoured," "vacuumed," "and for the first

time simple" (199). Corinthians' romantic sexual intercourse is a refuge from "roses . . . and silk underwear and bottles of perfume" (200), from "chocolate creams in a heart-shaped box" (200), and from "a big house and a great car" (200).

In Henry's modest place, Corinthians feels she has agency. "In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new. She was grateful to this man who rented a tiny room from her father, who ate without a knife and did not even own a pair of dress shoes. A perfect example of the men her parents had kept her from" (201). In performing the role of the protective brother, Milkman interferes in Corinthians' quest. He reports her secret relationship to his father. Corinthians is now forbidden to leave the house. Her father forced her to quit her job, evicted Henry and garnished his wages (215). Milkman's patronizing act is, once again, subverted by women. Corinthians decides to move to a small house in Southside with Porter (334). In defending her sister, Lena reminds Milkman of the day when he peed on the maple tree whose leaves are now dead. "You have been laughing at us all your life ... Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house" (216), Lena protests. "You don't know a single thing about either of us. We made roses, that's all you knew" (215). Lena continues, "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" (215). Returning the gaze on Milkman, Lena contends that his assumption of authority comes from "that hog's gut that hangs down between [his] legs" (216), which makes him a "sad," "pitiful," "stupid," "selfish," and "hateful man" (216). As Patrick Bryce Byork puts it, "Lena further testifies to Milkman's disconnection from self and place by simply restricting himself in performing the prescribed social codes of womanizing and male-domination which mask and assuage his sense of insecure self" (101).

Lena associates the Dead women's servitude with the act of "making artificial flowers," which constitutes a form of sublimation, to replace the potential violence that these suffocated women might inflict on Milkman:



"I was the one who started making artificial flowers....It kept me quiet," Lena confesses. "That's why they make those people in the asylum weave baskets and make rag rugs. It kept them quiet. If they didn't have baskets, they might find out what's really wrong and do something. Something terrible" (213). Reference to the artificial roses illustrates the fact that Lena is aware that gender is fake, a performance. She sees herself to be "the last rose" that Milkman has peed on in the house. Lena, metaphorically, implies that she ceased to be a woman: "I don't make roses anymore" (216). She asks Milkman to get out of her room. Reference to the room recalls Virginia Woolf's long essay, "A Room of One's Own," when she stipulates that "a woman must have her own room in order to write" (4). Lena finds her space in rejecting her identity of an "artificial rose" and in excluding her brother, the mirror of Macon Dead, from her room.

Lena stops being silent. She now has a voice in responding back to Milkman, the figure of patriarchy. Corinthians finds her space in her job and in the simple room of Henry Porter. Ruth finds her room in the cemetery in order to express herself. Hagar, despite her physical omission, finds her room in the textual space, wherein she becomes the disembodied ghost who incarnates the voice and theme of love. Morrison's women are not, as Trudier Harris thinks, "servants who content themselves with existing in the tiny spaces into which Macon and Milkman have shoved them" (109). Morrison's Black women are not men's objects, but subjects whose actions and yearnings affect Milkman's life: "My family's driving me crazy," Milkman complains to Guitar. "My mother wants me to think like her and hate my father. Corinthians

won't speak to me; Lena wants me out. And Hagar wants me chained to her bed or dead" (222). Milkman feels hated, excluded and paradoxically confined within these women's spaces. Morrison's Black women have power. They are not mere bodies to expose, to sexually abuse, and to act upon. They resist and transcend race, gender and class paradigms.

[1] Narrating the dream to his friend, Guitar, Milkman focuses on Ruth digging in the garden: "She made little holes and tucked something that looked like a small onion in them . . . tulips began to grow out of the holes [then] several stalks were coming out of the ground behind her . . . the tubes were getting taller . . . pressing up against each other and up against his mother's dress" (105). But Ruth kept on digging "while some stems began to sprout bloody red heads that bobbed over and touch her back. The stems become smothering flowers, taking away her breath, and covering her till Milkman could just see a mound of tangled tulips covering her body" (105).

[2] In "One is Not Born a Woman," Monique Wittig argues that women's imaginary construction as a woman in the patriarchal culture stems from her association with the natural order as through the process of procreation, matriarchy, marriage...etc: "We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call 'natural.' Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this 'nature' within ourselves (a nature which is only an idea)" (2015).

### About the Author

**Houda Hamdi** is a professor of Drama at Christ-Roi in Longueuil, Canada. She is also a professor of French language at La Commission Scolaire de Montréal. She holds a PhD in American literature from the University of Montreal (2016) and completed her Master's degree in African American literature in 2009. She is currently working on research addressing the issues related to dis-cursive perceptions of language and identity.



## NOTES

1. Narrating the dream to his friend, Guitar, Milkman focuses on Ruth digging in the garden: "She made little holes and tucked something that looked like a small onion in them . . . tulips began to grow out of the holes [then] several stalks were coming out of the ground behind her . . . the tubes were getting taller . . . pressing up against each other and up against his mother's dress" (105). But Ruth kept on digging "while some stems began to sprout bloody red heads that bobbed over and touch her back. The stems become smothering flowers, taking away her breath, and covering her till Milkman could just see a mound of tangled tulips covering her body" (105).
2. In "One is Not Born a Woman," Monique Wittig argues that women's imaginary construction as a woman in the patriarchal culture stems from her association with the natural order as through the process of procreation, patriarchy, marriage...etc: "We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call 'natural.' Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this 'nature' within ourselves (a nature which is only an idea)" (2015).

## REFERENCES

- Awkward, Michael. "'Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*." *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: A Casebook*. Ed. Jan Furman. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 76-90.
- Bordo, Susan. "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body." *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 2362-76.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- . "Structure, Habitus, Power, Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power." *Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1994. 123-54.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Wacquant, Loïc J. D. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity, 1992.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Byork, Patrick Bryce. *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place within the Community*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992.
- Erickson, Leslie Goss. *Re-Visioning of the Heroic Journey in Postmodern Literature: Toni Morrison, Julia Alvarez, Arthur Miller, and American Beauty*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- Gama, Jessica. "'Without Leaving the Ground, She Could Fly': Ecofeminism and Soul Fulfillment in Toni Morrison's *Pilate*." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self Knowledge* 1.4 (2008): 49-53. Web. 21 July. 2015.



- Harris, Trudier. "Song of Solomon." Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase, 2009. 5-34.
- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York UP, 2000. 348-68. Print
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Mori, Aoi. *Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Vintage, 1977.
- . "Behind the Making of the Black Book." *Toni Morrison, What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non-Fiction*. Ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008. 34-38.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. New York: SUNY P, 2004.
- Page, Philip. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998. Print.
- Walther, Malin LaVon. "Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty." *Black American Literature Forum*. 24.4 (1990): 775-89. JSTOR. Web. 29 Aug. 2015.
- Witting, Monique. "One Is Not Born a Woman." *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 2014-23.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin, 1945.

