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## Toni Morrison's Gender Politics in *Song of Solomon*<sup>1</sup>

### POLITIQUE DE GENRE DE TONI MORRISON DANS LE CHANT DE SALOMON

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**Abstract:** Racial and gender oppression are always of Toni Morrison's great concern. She uses her pen to create fictions and non-fiction essays to fight for her fellow African American people. As a black female who enjoys the discourse power, she waves her gender politics into the great novel *Song of Solomon*.

**Key words:** Toni Morrison; Gender politics; Song of Solomon

**Résumé:** L'oppression raciale and l'oppression des femmes sont toujours les deux thèmes préoccupants de Toni Morrison. Elle utilise sa plume pour créer des fictions et des essais non-fiction afin de se battre pour ses compatriotes afro-américaines. En tant qu'une femme noire qui aime le pouvoir du discours, elle brandit sa politique de genre dans le grand roman Le chant de Salomon.

**Mots clés:** Toni Morrison; Politique de genre; Chant de Salomon

“For Morrison — as is also true for many other contemporary African American women writers, including Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor, to name three — gender is not separate from racial identity; while their arguments are for liberation from racial and gender oppression, both race and gender themselves are always seen as liberating points from which to construct a language or to create a literature that is political in forms as well as in subject matter” (Rigney 2).

Morrison creates *Song of Solomon* not only to advertise her political philosophy on racial problems but also to underscore her political philosophy on gender problems. *Song of Solomon* is the only novel of Morrison in which a black male is portrayed as the protagonist and it is the only one presented from a male point of view. Although the narrative mainly goes around Milkman's search for self and his ancestral identity, “the power in Morrison's novel rests with the multiple roles of the women who touch his life, making it the story of Black woman's sacrifices to protect and ensure the community's ancestral memory” (Beaulieu 17). Susan Farrell argues that the narrative of *Song of Solomon* can be interpreted as a black woman's response to the African American political situation in the United States of the 1970s, particularly to the aftermath of the civil rights/black power movements (140). Morrison politicizes the narrative of the novel and virtually she makes the young black male's Bildungsroman to be an attestation of greatness of African American females. In her storytelling, Morrison attacks black sexism and the black patriarchy violently. At the same time, she attempts to construct the political and social status for her black sisters in a patriarchy society.

### 1. THE GENDER POLITICS IN THE DEDICATION OF *SONG OF SOLOMON*

In the dedication of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison puts only one word “Daddy” on the first page. On the next page, she writes, “The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names.” Close behind in the forward, Morrison talks about the death of her father. She commemorates his love, his great sacrifice, and his encouragement for his four children. For readers, it is quite clear her father is vitally important to Morrison. Hence, when they read the young protagonist's quest

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story for his self identity and for the real name of his father's father and his ancestors', they may easily anticipate that the narrative is centered on the male characters and their fathers. Actually, Morrison expects her readers to participate in her storytelling and the construction of her gender politics in the narrative. She wants them to decode her political intentions actively. The claim that Morrison devotes her novel merely to the male characters is a bias. Gay Wilentz insightfully points out that there must be someone missing from the dedication (114). Reading the dedication again, readers may have such a question: Since the fathers soar, how could the children know their names? Wilentz continues to make it clear that "a group missing from the dedication whose presence is overpowering in the novel itself—the mothers (grandmothers, aunt, older sibling, female ancestor)" (Ibid). Here is the ratiocination: When the father soars off, there must be the females who are left to teach the children their names.

Henry Louis Gats, Jr., observes that much of black literature is distinguished by the stylistic use of the trope that is not "the presence of voice at all, but its absence. To speak of a silence is to speak in an oxymoron". (Rigney 22) In *Unspeaking Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*, Morrison also shows her apparent fascination with the meanings that attach to the idea of absence:

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily "not-there"; that a void may be empty, but it is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. (11)

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison deftly waves her fascination with the meaning of absence into the narrative. She uses the trope of absence quite politically. First, she puts the signifying absence of the African American women in the dedication. According to Morrison's political philosophy, because of the racial oppression, Afro-Americans are always ignored and made absent in the scope of American literature. Even if they are mentioned, they are usually made mute or unimportant. Oppressed racially and sexually, African American females are liable to suffer from such kind of oblivion and to be left invisible in the blank. In the dedication, Morrison deliberately leaves the Afro-American females in the blank. Morrison uses this absence to call the readers' attention to those forgotten mothers (grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, female ancestors).

In the dedication, Morrison invites readers to notice: What is not mentioned are the important roles African American women have played and are still playing in passing the names, the family histories, the African culture, heritage and African values to their children. "What is left unsaid is equally as important as what is stated and specified" (Rigney 26). In the dedication, the black women, as a group, are absent, silent, or invisible, but in the context of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison does not obliterate them in the process of the reconstruction of the forgotten African American history and heritage. Morrison leaves pages for her black sisters to have a full play in the black young man Milkman's Bildungsroman. Politically, Morrison wants to give the African American women the full weight they deserve in the black male dominated society. She wants readers to know: even in a black male dominated society, in the Bildungsroman of a black male, the protagonist Milkman and other male characters could not have the monopoly of all the pages. There are still many pages that are reserved for black women to manifest their political importance in the reconstruction of the forgotten African American historical and cultural heritage. Morrison uses these pages to ensure the African American women that they could receive their due political positions in the black male dominated society and to ensure them that they have a crucial discourse power in the formation and the passing on the African culture, and heritage.

## **2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL POSITIONS FOR THE AFRO-AMERICAN FEMALE COMMUNITY**

In her discussion of racial politics, Morrison offers a third solution as a way out for the racial problems—the appeal to African Americans for their return to the black rootedness; for their return to the blackness; for the reconstruction of the black center; for the rebuilding of black logos. According to Morrison's racial politics, the achievement of these goals is dependent on the black folks' shaking off the white logos that has been imposed on them for long; on their unlearning and de-centering white values; on their connecting to their family histories, to their black culture and heritage for their roots. However, the realization of the above depends on a precondition: the construction of a political position for the entire black female community.

In Morrison's gender politics, only black women could shoulder the great responsibility of guiding African American people back to their blackness and reconstructing their black logos, black values. Black fathers, the black males, would soar irresponsibly. They flew away just as Milkman's ancestor Solomon and the black issuance agent Robert Smith did. After they soared, there were only their women and children left behind. The heavy task of connecting the children to their fathers, to their family histories and to the black cultural heritage and traditions fell on the shoulder of the abandoned females. Therefore, to construct a political position for black females and to speak of "the political ramifications of certain of their actions" become Morrison's concern in the narrative of *Song of Solomon*. (Rigney 25) Morrison firmly believes

that the whole black community would come to know the importance of the black center, black *logos*, black culture as well as the importance of black women who are acting as the transmitters of culture after she has established a political position for the black women. Consequently, the African American people, both the black males and the black females would liberate themselves from racial oppressions and gender oppressions.

In Morrison's novels, the great Afro-American females are often referred to as the African mothers, grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, and female ancestors. These characters are most frequently depicted as the politically muted in spite of the lyrical language of the mothers Morrison always provides for them in her novels. "They themselves do not articulate, or perhaps realize, the political ramifications of certain of their actions" (Ibid). According to Morrison's gender philosophy, most of the black women, who are present in her stories or who are living outside those stories in the real world, are still muted politically. Therefore, Morrison politicizes her language as an effective means to break this political silence in the narrative of *Song of Solomon*. She "translates the body itself into a political 'speech'" (Ibid).

Ambitiously, Morrison manages to construct a collective political importance for the whole African American female community by visualizing "the political ramifications of certain of their actions". The motivation of this visualization is that she wants to tell the readers how great "the political ramifications of certain of their actions" are: Although African American females are suffering from the double oppressions—the racial oppression from the whites and the patriarchal oppression from the blacks—all the time, they never resign themselves to fate. Instead, they have bravely and dumbly undertaken a sacred mission to pass on the legacies of their black ancestors and the great African culture to their children. These black women are deeply rooted in the African American tradition. They have a more integrated world view of black culture and values. They could extend their knowledge of African American life to include an Afrocentric perspective in which there is dialogue with the ancestors. (Wilentz 121) They could extend the African world view to their children.

In the past, their unconscionable, unbearable stories are "unspeakable". But now, in the narrative of *Song of Solomon*, in a narrative that seems to be a male discourse, Morrison uses her subversive language to defy the male dominance and to speak for those great black females. Morrison uses her subversive narrative to turn the black male's Bildungsroman into the stories of great black women. Namely, Morrison creates an environment within the context of the novel for the stories of women. She manages to get them recognized and privileged.

In the novel, the visualization of "the political ramifications of certain of their actions" is the delineation of the African mothers, grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, and female ancestors' roles as "the transmitters of cultures and the inventors of language, itself the operative agency of culture" (Rigney 45). These great Afro-American females always "say the important things" to their children in order to direct their children back to the mysterious black culture. In the context of *Song of Solomon*, the role of the women has been that of educators, of guiding the children into African culture. Ada Mere comments on the role of women as tale tellers and instructors. African American females, she writes, "are the most primary and constant agents of child socialization" (3) It is these black women through Africa and the diaspora that "represent the ultimate value in life, namely, the continuation of the group" (Steady 32). According to Morrison and other contemporary black women writers, the black women have "mothered" African American culture into being (Reagon 177).

"However, the ancestors women are not themselves individuated any more than other characters; they represent a group consciousness, a history as well as a culture, what McKay refers to as the 'ineffable qualities of blackness'" (Ibid). Collectively, the women in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* emerge as nurturers, teachers, and storytellers. The "political ramifications of certain of black women' actions" is symbolized in Milkman's Bildungsroman in which it is the great Afro-American females who act as the boy's tutors in unlearning the white *logos* first and then picking up the black *logos* and the black values. In the narrative of *Song of Solomon*, it is the women who have kept track of the names and stories so that the fathers could soar and the children could learn and remember. To be specific, in Milkman's quest for his self identity and for the history of his family, his aunt Pilate, the female ancestor Circe and the black woman Susan Byrd teach him how to recover the name and the history of his Solomon family and teach him how to rediscover his blackness.

Among Milkman's spiritual mentors, the most powerful of these women is Pilate Dead, Milkman's aunt who serves as a link between the material world and the spiritual world as she recreates history and herself based on the bits and pieces of memory she carries with her. In the novel, Pilate acts as the "custodian of the culture" (Arhin 92-4). She inspires her nephew to go to the South in his search for the acknowledgement of his heritage.

O Sugarman done fly away  
Sugarman down gone  
Sugarman cut across the sky  
Sugarman gone home ...(Song 5)

The fragment of the blues song which Pilate sings at the birth of Milkman will always lead Milkman to quest for the self and community identity. Singing her blues, Pilate teaches her nephew that "he must free himself from the linguistic bondage into which he was born" (Powell 56). Although Pilate could not free Milkman from the oppression of the white *logos* directly, she teaches Milkman that he must find back the true name for him and his family in order to unlearn the

white *logos* and connect to the African heritage and culture. Pilates tells the past stories of her and her father to Milkman; she attracts him with the harmonious maternal life of her family, which is the revision of the ideal African village compound; she uses her magic power to defy the white logic and she challenges Milkman to drop the percepts of the white *logos*. The association with Pilate makes Milkman bored with the materialist Middle class life in the North. It inspires Milkman to set off to the South in quest for his true name, his familial identity and his black rootedness, although Milkman does not realize it and thinks that he is searching for the gold that has been hidden in a cave somewhere in the South. This quest leads Milkman back to the small farming community of his father and Pilate's youth. There, Milkman discovers that the first level of his misnaming is stripped away, and he becomes not 'Milkman' but Macon Dead's son.

In his quest journey, Milkman encounters the second custodian of the African culture in his ongoing education to learn how to get rid of the white *logos*. Circe, like Pilate, is "a conjurer figure, a keeper of spirits, a vessel of secrets from the past, a figure so utterly beyond the pale of the white *logos*" (Powell 56-57). Circe tells Milkman the stories of his grandfather and grandmother. From Circe Milkman learns the first names of them, although the knowledge from Circe is fragmented and unsure like that from Pilate. This mysterious woman Circe provides Milkman with the direction he needs in order to continue his quest, telling him that his grandfather's 'people' came from "down around Culpepper somewhere. Charlemagne or something like that" (*Song* 246).

Arriving at his ancestral home of Shalimar, Milkman find that the brand of the white *logos* on him so evident to the town folks: "They looked at his skin and saw it as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers" (*Song* 269). This finding hardens Milkman's will to find back his true name, his familial identity and his black rootedness, his blackness. He turns to Susan Byrd for further information. This lady tells him the story of the flight myth of Solomon and his abandoned wife Lena. She tells him the story of his grandfather Jack and grandmother Sing. There, Milkman also meets a black woman named Sweet, who gives him a symbolic baptism by washing off the white *logos* from his body and soul.

All of these great African American women help Milkman to experience an ultimately Nirvana. They help him to discard the white *logos* that have been imposed on him. They help him to free from the linguistic oppression of the white language and enable him to regain his black rootedness through the quest for his familial identity, through his connection to black heritage.

### **3. MORRISON'S ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE OPPRESSED AFRO-AMERICAN FEMALE COMMUNITY TO FIGHT AGAINST BLACK PATRIARCHY**

Barbara Hill Rigney quotes from Morrison's essay *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* to analyze the politics in her language: "The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language — its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasked language" (11). Rigney argues that "Morrison scatters her signs, her political insights, and it is only through an analysis of her language that we can reconstruct an idea of the political and artistic revolution constituted in her work" (7). She further points out that Morrison's language is "the language of black and feminine discourse — semiotic, maternal, informed as much by silence as by dialogue, as much by absence as by presence" (ibid). In the narrative, Morrison shows her deft mastery of the incomparable language skill to speak out for the unspoken Afro-American females as much by silence as by dialogue and as much by absence as by presence. In the dedication, she makes the Afro-American females, the mothers (grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, female ancestors) absent, invisible, silent, and voiceless from the print; while in the male dominated text, she uses her language to construct the presence of the Afro-American females from the beginning to the ending of the story. Morrison does more than just present Afro-American women in the narrative of the novel. She enables them to be participatory and decisive in the development of the plot. She gives voices to the black females who are made absent, voiceless in the dedication deliberately. They are singing loudly, speaking bravely in the Bildungsroman of a young male protagonist. And she even makes the female characters like Pilate, First Corinthians, Circe, Sing, Sweet etc., play very important part in the growing up of the black young man Milkman Dead.

Rigney points out that Morrison wants her black sisters to enter willingly the "forbidden zone" of gender consciousness (and unconsciousness) that lies through and beyond the mirror of gender and race (3). She believes that Morrison describes it as "a place where women imagination is 'unruly and let loose', and where language is subversive, where the female body claims the power to articulated itself, where silence speaks and the unconscious becomes the conscious" (ibid). In the story, Morrison creates a language which is subversive. This subversive language encourages the readers to note that the female characters in the story start to claim the power to articulate themselves and they begin to break the silence from the unconsciousness to the consciousness.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison first uses the narrative voice to delineate a black patriarchal society that oppresses black females. The oppressive form of male dominance which constrains female voices and attempts to silence those who would resist it is the depiction of Macon Dead and his "Dead" family:

Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in the every world he spoke to her. This disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their butter complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his 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 the drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves. In his absence his daughters bent their necks over blood-red squares of velvet and waited eagerly for any hint of him, and his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it. (*Song* 10-11)

This depiction uncovers such a truth: Cold, controlling, and domineering Macon rules his household like a tyrant. In the "Dead" family, each member is made to be awkward with fear of the presence of Macon Dead. The wife is "stunned into silence" by his rejection; the "frozen heat of his glance" always makes his two "half-grown" daughters struck with panic. They are always living under the shadow of his patriarchal influence. Macon's contempt makes them know what to do with themselves either before him or in his absence. Although Macon's male gaze of contempt silences the females, "in place of the 'girlish voices' that have been snuffed out is the implied inner discourse of female desire" (Mobley 52).

When Morrison is describing the oppressive noise of male patriarchal domination in the beginning part of the narrative, she intentionally encodes females' rebellious consciousness into the discourse. Thus, Morrison's "narrative voice allows the readers not only to hear the sound of male domination but also to hear the responses to it and the consequences of it for the female voice" (Mobley 52-53). This is exactly what Morrison wants to do through her storytelling.

It seems that *Song of Solomon* is a male discourse, because the plot is always within the framework of the Bildungsroman story of the black young man Milkman Dead and his quest for his self and family identity in the South of the United States. However, Morrison tactfully makes this male discourse to become a political female discourse which implies the awakening of the black females. In Morrison's political philosophy, the language is subversive. As she uses her language to construct the authority of the male gaze and the male dominance, she is also using her language to subvert this patriarchal domination. Where there are the gender oppressions, where there are the resistances to those oppressions. Therefore, when Morrison guides the readers to hear the oppressive voice of the male, she encourages the readers to listen to the resistant voice from the black female. Although the resistant voice is faint, inaudible in the beginning, as long as it is oppressed too much and too long, it would pile up to be a loud voice that would speak out one day. When Morrison depicts the silence and the unconscious of the females in the beginning of the narrative, she is preparing them to speak and changing the unconscious resistance to the conscious.

In the narrative, the silent, oblique female resistance to the patriarchal oppression is converted to be the voiced, direct claim for the power to articulated female themselves and it flares into an open rebellion against the male gaze, the patriarchal oppression when the Dead sisters fight for Corinthians' love. "When Corinthians woke up one day to find herself a forty-two-year-old maker of rose petals, she suffered a severe depression which lasted until she made up her mind to get out of the house" (*Song* 189). So, she makes up her mind to get away from her "Dead" family as possible as she could. She hunts jobs out and gets a post to be the local poet laureate Michael-Mary Graham's amanuensis. "Actually, the work Corinthians did was good for her" (*Song* 190). To work out of her family really changes her whole life. It first makes the "half-grown" daughter of the Dead family to sense that she is not like a child any more:

In that house she had what she never had in her own: responsibility. She flourished in a way, and exchanged arrogance occasionally for confidence. The humiliation of wearing a uniform, even if it was blue, and deceiving people was tempered by the genuine lift which came of having her own money rather than receiving an allowance like a child. (Ibid)

Then, it brings Corinthians the most important thing: an encounter with love for the first time in her 42 years of life. A black man named Porter, who is the member of the terrorist organization Seven Days and also one of the tenants of Macon properties, fanned the spark of Corinthians longing for love.

In the beginning of this relation, Corinthians suspected Porter's intention and she was deterred by her father's patriarchal oppression: "My father. It's only my father [...] the way he is." "You know as well as I do. He never wanted us to mix with [...] people. He's very strict." "I'm sorry. I have to live there. I can't let him know about us. Not yet" (*Song* 195). Although Corinthians was still confined by the restrictions, Morrison uses the narrative voice to reveal the process of the black female's change: She developed her resistance to her oppressed life in silence first, then she used her daring action to speak out loudly that she wanted to change her destiny. Corinthians challenged herself silently inside: "But when? [...] If not at forty-four, then when? If not now, when even my pubic hair is turning gray and when my breasts have dropped of their own accord-then when?" (Ibid). As Corinthians challenged her life with the question, the Afro-American

female's silent resistance spoke out and articulated itself. "When, then?" Porter spoke Corinthians' question aloud. Morrison uses the male voice to subvert the male tyranny. According to Morrison's philosophy of the political, subversive language, it is the male voice that awakens black women and ignites their rebellions against male tyranny. Morrison uses Porter's subversive male language to encourage Corinthians: "I don't want a doll baby. I want a woman. A grown-up woman that's not scared of her daddy. I guess you don't want to be a grown-up woman, Corrie" (*Song* 196). When Corinthians started to think of the question: "A grown-up woman?" (Ibid), she came to realize that there were no lady around or she knew was a grown-up one.

By the time she reached number 12 Not Doctor Street, her trembling had become uncontrollable. Suddenly the shaking stopped and she froze at the steps. Two seconds later she turned on her heel and ran back down the street to where Porter had stopped the car. The moment she had put her foot on the step leading to the porch, she saw her ripeness mellowing and rotting before a heap of read velvet scraps on a round oak table.... Corinthians ran toward it faster than she had ever run in her life, faster than she'd cut across the grass on Honore Island when she was five and the whole family went there for holiday. Faster even than the time she flew down the stairs having seen for the first time what the disease had done to her grander father [...] She rapped again, louder, mindless of who might see her under the gray beech tree just around the corner from home. So close and yet so far, she felt as though she were in a dream; there, but not there, within a hair's breadth but not reaching it. (*Song* 197)

Here in the narrative, Morrison wants to tell the readers that when black females start to reflect on their identity and future, their resistance to the male oppression is turning from the silent, unconscious one into the loud, conscious resistance. They would let out their desire for the freedom of the patriarchal oppressions strongly and they would fight for their freedom desperately and violently just like what Corinthians did. "She banged her knuckles until they ached to get the attention of the living flesh behind the glass, and would have smashed her fist through the window just to touch him, feel his heat, the only thing that would protect her from a smothering death of dry roses" (*Song* 198-199). Corinthians crazily climbed up the car to stop the man, who encouraged her to resist her past dying destiny, from going away, because she was so strongly determined that she would never let the chance of fleeing from her dead destiny go. "She just lay there, stretched across the car, her fingers struggling for a grip on steel. She thought for nothing. Nothing except what her body needed to do is to hang on, to never let go. Even if he drove off at one hundred miles an hour, she would hang on" (*Song* 199). Morrison's narrative voice continues to inform the readers that once the black female starts to resist, she would find "a self-esteem that was quite new" (*Song* 201). Just like Corinthians, she thanked Porter because he made her to be self-respected. When she walked the four blocks, she would never be afraid to mount the porch steps.

In *Song of Solomon*, it is the first time that the black female claims her power and fights against the male oppressed destiny for her freedom overtly and loudly in the male dominated society. Morrison makes it very significant because it is the first but not the last occasion on which black female condemns the patriarchy and speaks out for the unspoken oppressions that Afro-American women have suffered in the past silently.

In an early part of the novel, Morrison depicts the Dead sisters both to be the victims of Macon's patriarchal oppression. But it seems that Morrison wants to make these two sisters different in their attitudes and their responses towards the black male oppression. As stated before, Corinthians chose to fight against that male tyranny and she had undergone a process from the unconscious resistance to the conscious protest. But Morrison leaves the readers such a misguided impression that the other "Dead" daughter Magdalene called Lena would submit herself to the oppressed life with no resistance because she "seemed resigned to her life" (*Song* 189). Though Morrison gives the readers such a negative image of Magdalene called Lena, she never expects her readers to be blinded by this illusion. In Morrison's gender politics, since certain absences could underscore certain presences and they call attentions to themselves, arresting us with intentionality and purpose, Magdalene called Lena's case does not necessarily mean that she give herself up to the male oppression. Her resistance must be silent and invisible, and it can never be said that she didn't make a stand and fight against the oppression. One day when she resisted openly, it must be a great resistance.

When Magdalene called Lena knew her brother Milkman told on the love affair of her sister Corinthians to the stone-hearted father Macon and Milkman argued irrationally that he was doing good to his sister, she broke out. She began to denounce the male oppression on black females publicly:

What do you know about somebody not being good enough for somebody else? And since when did you care whether Corinthians stood up or fell down? You've 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. But now, all of a sudden, you have Corinthians' welfare at heart and break her up from a man you don't approve of. Who are you to approve or disapprove anybody or anything? I was breathing air in the world thirteen years before you lungs were even formed. Corinthians, twelve. You don't know a single thing about wither one of us—we made roses; that's all you knew—but you know what's best for the very woman who wiped the dribble from your chin because you were too young to know how to spit. Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooled; when you wanted to play, we entertained

you; when you get grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-tone Ford, everything in his house stooped for you. You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You've never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solve a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic. Where do you get the right to decide our lives? (Song 215)

Through Magdalene's words, "Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives?" (Ibid) Morrison gives the strongest voice to the African American women. She makes it a political manifesto of the black women's desire for the freedom from the black male domination. Through Magdalene's words, Morrison points out that the preservation of patriarchal privilege residing in Milkman<sup>1</sup> is the cause of the tragedy of Corinthians. "I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (Ibid). Morrison uses Lena's words to reveal a fact that Milkman became so bossy in the family just because he was a male. Milkman intervened in Corinthians' love and her resistance to Macon's patriarchal control because he thought he took the patriarchal authority from his father since he beat him. Hence, Morrison further points out that the tragedy of all African American women is caused by "the assumption of male privilege that is grounded in the possession of women" (Duvall 86). This male privilege is symbolized by their all kinds of ways to pee on women. In the narrative, Morrison expresses her own gender politics: As soon as black women realize consciously that the male patriarchy is the origin of oppression on them, they should stand up to fight against it bravely because they are already aware what and who have oppressed them so long. As they know the origin of the oppression, they shall stand up and fight against the source of the evil. Just like Lena, she declared: "I don't make roses any more, and you have pissed your last in this house" (Song 216). Through the storytelling, Morrison wants to tell her fellow black sisters: Men have no right to determine women's lives. Where there are the oppressions from the male patriarchy, where there should be the brave resistance against them consciously.

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