
(De) Constructing Patriarchal and Sexist Discourses: Re-Reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*



Francis Tiambei, PhD

Department of English and Cultural Studies, University of Buea, Republic of Cameroon

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2704-5949

ABSTRACT: Patriarchal and sexist discourses have come under scorching attacks from most feminist writers since the advent of modern feminism. This work analyses Toni Morrison's attempt at deconstructing patriarchal and sexist discourses in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. It adds its voice to the ever vibrant conversation on the issue of patriarchy and sexism especially as portrayed in the works of African American female writers who see their stories as twice-told tales - victims of both racism and patriarchal dominance. Toni Morrison challenges patriarchal and sexist values which she sees as monolithic discourses that hold no ground. She portrays female characters whose never-say-die attitudes go a long way towards deconstructing this monolithic system. By showing her male characters as weak, irresponsible, and social misfits, and her female characters as dynamic, strong, and hardworking individuals on whom their different families rely for security and sustenance, Morrison is not only rejecting the prevailing patriarchal values of our society, she is as well on a crusade towards its deconstruction. In so doing, she does not try to paint spotless alabaster heroines, but rather she shows ordinary women in their struggle for survival in an indifferent and often times cruel environment.

KEYWORDS: Deconstructing, Patriarchy, Patriarchal discourse, Sexist discourse

INTRODUCTION

The issue of patriarchal dominance of most human societies has become quite a major call for concern within most feminist circles today. It is a truism that writers do not write ex nihilo; they are shaped by their socio-political and historical backgrounds. In this light Emmanuel Ngara says: "Literature does not only reflect and reproduce society – it also passes judgment on society and helps to shape social development [...] It is the function of writers to inform the society when things are going wrong" (137). Still in this light, Alan Swingewood adds that literature is "preeminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it" (12). Toni Morrison falls in line with this aspect of literary creativity. She uses her art to right some of the wrongs of her society.

In *The Future of Literature* Arthur S. Trace asserts that in some communities the position of the creative writer is so preponderant that the society sees him as its moral conscience. In other words the writer is seen as the torchbearer of his/her community. In this light, Joseph Conrad in "The Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* argues that "...art itself may be defined as the single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. [...] The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal" (vi).

Conrad's argument therefore, is that for art/literature to be credible the artist should seek the truth and show that truth to the world.

A.W.E O'Shaughnessy in "We Are the Music Makers" underpins the monumental role played by writers in shaping their various societies in particular and nations in general; to him writers are pathfinders and visionaries who have the onerous task of bearing the Promethean light for their societies. He describes them as "dreamers of dreams" who in their creative works "fashion an empire's glory", adding that writers are double-edged swords who can bring down an empire as well (114).

The aim of this paper therefore is to show that Toni Morrison considers the patriarchal social order as a monolithic philosophy which has no basis in truth, and in her works she tries to deconstruct this social order as we see in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. She tries to unravel patriarchy which she sees as having a built-in bias against women. She does this through the unsavoury portrayal of the male characters in both works and the subversion of patriarchal values as exemplified in her portrayal of the female characters.

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To better carry out this study I opted for feminist criticism as my guiding compass. This choice of this approach was guided by the fact that the issue of patriarchy and its effects on modern societies has become a central question in the feminist quest for freedom and equality with men.

Toni Morrison and the Subversion of Patriarchal/Sexist Discourses in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*

Toni Morrison sees herself as a “black woman novelist” (Caldwell in Taylor-Guthrie 243), and also as an “American Midwestern novelist.” These three terms – black, woman, and American - suggest the three literary contexts of Toni Morrison's writings.

In the 1970s when Toni Morrison came to the literary limelight most literary characterizations of women in general, and black women in particular, had not moved beyond stereotypes; the nature of which differed for white and black women as a result of their differing historical experiences (Kubistchek 16). As a reaction to these sexist/racist stereotypes, most 19th and 20th century black male writers were engaged in an attempt to present what they thought was a positive image of black women. Their aim was to reject these negative stereotypes about black women by portraying irreproachable heroines in their own works. By so doing they fell into the trap of stereotypes themselves.

Black women writers like Toni Morrison had not just these stereotypes to address; they had, as well, the challenge of the infantilizing patriarchal system that had existed since time immemorial. Lois Tyson defines patriarchy as “...any society in which men hold all or most of the power. Usually patriarchy gives men power by promoting traditional gender roles. Patriarchal men and women believe that anyone who violates traditional gender roles is in some way unnatural, unhealthy, or even immoral” (141-42).

Toni Morrison in most of her writings tries to deconstruct the foundation on which most of these patriarchal and sexist philosophies are based. She challenges the very basis of patriarchy by portraying women whose never-say-die attitudes go a long way to showing that patriarchal values intended to infantilize women hold no ground. This is greatly manifested in her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. She is thus in line with Simone de Beauvoir who says “One is not born, but rather one becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as the feminine” (295).

In the Loraine Society of *The Bluest Eye*, patriarchal values are the order of the day. Right from the cradle children are educated according to gender roles and stereotypes. In this light parents offer their daughters mostly baby dolls during the period of Christmas. To these parents, these dolls represent what every girl cherishes. Claudia, one of the protagonists of the novel, puts it clearly: “It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the choking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish” (20).

Apart from the racial undertone of this statement, there is also the sexist aspect as well. In this society girl children are taught to perform particular roles in the society. Uppermost amongst these are childbearing and nurturing. The baby dolls are there to remind the girls of their function in the community. No one cares to know if these girls love the baby dolls or not. The society dictates that dolls are for girls, and so must it be.

Talking about this gender role stereotyping, Hester Eisenstein writes that “Instead of being openly coerced into accepting their secondary status, women were conditioned into embracing it by the process of sex role stereotyping” (6).

Claudia, for example, is not interested in these dolls, but no one cares about what she thinks. As a girl, she must start playing with dolls as a prelude to her future role as a mother. She says “I was bemused by the thing itself and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was only interested in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother” (20).

By putting these words in the mouth of her teenage female character, Toni Morrison is positioning herself at the forefront of the feminist subversion of the patriarchal social order. By attacking one of patriarchy's most sacred cows – the issue of motherhood - she is sending a message that in this new dispensation nothing is sacrosanct but human freedom. Many may consider this attack on the family and childbearing as a wild goose chase, but it is a real existential threat to Western Civilization today as we find that more and more women are rejecting motherhood which they see as an impediment to the expression of their freedom.

In Loraine, men lord it over women, and are hardly made to answer for their misdeeds. Cholly Breedlove rapes his twelve-year-old daughter twice and impregnates her, but the community shows no compassion for her and offers no help. It is a society that considers the victim as responsible for her predicament. Pecola is forced to leave school because of her condition and is isolated from other children. Moreover, she is the subject of titillating and judgmental statements by adults. Some say she has to “carry some of the blame” (189). And to crown it all, her own mother beats her almost to the point of death for allowing herself to be raped. This is a clear case of victimizing the victim. There seems to be a major conspiracy of silence engendered by this patriarchal social order which looks the other way when men commit crimes. Nobody seems ready to raise a finger in denunciation of what Cholly Breedlove has done to his own little daughter. Some are even amused. Claudia and her elder sister, Frieda, are the only voices of reason in this community. At

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their young ages they are already a menacing force to unreason. Claudia's assessment of Pecola's tragedy is very thought-provoking. She says: "They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, 'Poor little thing' or 'poor baby', but there was only head-wagging where those words would have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern but saw only veils" (190).

Pecola is the victim of men's brutality and sexist injustice. A man commits a heinous crime against a little girl, and the girl is considered responsible for the man's crime. In this context the home is no longer the place of protection and fulfillment, but rather the centre for the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance and injustice.

Morrison has never advocated the Kantian art for art's sake, but has always put her art at the service of a cause. In all her works she is involved in a war of attrition on two fronts – the racial front and the gender front. On the racial front she lambastes the racist ideology that gave birth to slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and all the other forms of racial essentialism and discrimination. On the gender front she challenges patriarchy and deconstructs sexist stereotypes which work to stifle women's freedom and self-expression. Morrison's position therefore is antipodal to that of Ralph Ellison who says "I am a novelist, not an activist [...] I am primarily responsible for the health of American Literature and culture. When I write, I am trying to make some sense out of the chaos. To think that a writer must think about his Negroness is to fall in a trap (Ndougoussa 65).

The elimination of all forms of social dominance therefore is at the heart of Morrison's works – patriarchy being foremost amongst them. Commenting on the position of women in contemporary patriarchal societies Florence Stratton writes:

Whether she is elevated to the status of a goddess or reduced to the level of a prostitute, the designation is his designation, for he does the naming, whereas her experience as a woman is trivialized and distorted. Metaphysically, she is of the highest importance; practically she is nothing. She has no autonomy, no status as a character, for her person and her story are shaped to meet the requirements of his vision. One of these requirements is that she provides attractive packaging. She is thus constructed as beauty, eroticism, fecundity – the qualities the male Self values most in the female Other. (123)

It is this objectification of the woman that Morrison challenges in most of her works. She is of the same opinion with Shirley Christen quoted in Patricia Hills who says "In working towards our freedom we can help others work free from the traps of stereotypes. In the end anti-black, anti-female and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to same thing - antihumanity [...] We must reject not only the stereotypes others have of us but also what we have of ourselves and others" (597).

Like in most her works, Toni Morrison's male characters in *The Bluest Eye* turn out to be irresponsible no-goods who lead a purposeless and nihilistic lives characterized by hopelessness, failure, self-deception, and criminality. Cholly Breedlove epitomizes all these traits. His stock-in-trade is fighting with his wife each time he comes home in a fuddled state. And this is done mostly in the presence of the children. In his house the nightly fights have steadily become a nightly ritual that must be performed before going to bed. If this is not done, then the pathetic scenario will be re-enacted the following morning.

The narrator says: "Cholly had come home drunk. Unfortunately he had been too drunk to quarrel, so the whole business would have to erupt this morning. Because it has not taken place immediately, the on-coming fight would lack spontaneity; it would be calculated, uninspired and deadly" (40).

According to patriarchal values, the family is supposed to be a place of protection, self-fulfillment, and solidarity; but Morrison shows that it is far from it. The family is a family only in name. The only link between the parents is their nightly fights. When they fail to do so they must look for a way to catch up in the morning. As such, when Cholly comes home too drunk to fight, his wife is not happy because these fights have come to be part and parcel of her life. On this occasion she uses the lack of coal in the store to provoke a fight with Cholly. The narrator writes:

Pecola stilled her stomach taut and conserved her breath. They all knew that Mrs Breedlove could have, would have, and had, gotten coal from the shed, or that Sammy or Pecola could be directed to get it. But the unquarreled evening hung like the first not of a dirge in sullenly expectant air. An escapade of drunkenness, no matter how routine, had its ceremonial close. (41)

One sees here that the home is no longer the safe haven it is supposed to be. The nightly quarrels and fights seem to be the only things that give meaning to Mrs Breedlove's otherwise meaningless life. The narrator says "The [...] undistinguished days of Mrs Breedlove were identified, grouped, and classed by the quarrels. They gave substance to the minutes and the hours otherwise dim and unrecalled" (41).

One wonders whether we are talking about a husband and wife who are supposed to be cornerstones of each other's wellbeing, or we are talking about enemies brought together by the casting of some cosmic dice. Cholly is the archetypal good-for-nothing husband who has contributed a great deal to making his wife a frustrated and embittered woman whose beleaguered life sees meaning only in the

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nightly fights with her husband to the point that to deprive her of these nightly fights "...was to deprive her of all the zest and reasonableness of life. Cholly, by his habitual drunkenness and orneriness, provided them both with the materials they needed to make their lives tolerable" (42).

Before marriage Pauline Williams (aka Polly) lives in a dream world of romantic fantasies about love and happiness. She dreams of a stranger-lover who would come from a fairyland and who would transform her life and lead her towards a blissful existence. Her dreams of the unknown lover, who would redeem her from the torturous existence that was her lot, were mixed with the songs she heard in church about Christ the Redeemer. But unfortunately instead of this Christ-like lover to come her way, it is Cholly of all people who comes. From then on those romanticized visions of love and happiness are transformed into a nightmarish reality. Now, instead of having dreams, she has made herself the self-proclaimed soldier of Jesus struggling to put a rather useless man that destiny has saddled her with, straight. As the narrator puts it: "Mrs Breedlove considered herself an upright Christian woman burdened with a no-count man whom God wanted her to punish. [...] Mrs. Breedlove was not interested in Christ the Redeemer, but rather Christ the judge" (42).

In Cholly and Polly, Toni Morrison is clearly subverting the patriarchal and sexist narrative of marriage as a place of self-realization and bliss for the woman. She is actually deconstructing this age-old narrative. She paints a horribly bleak picture of marriage and the family as she seems to imply that marriage as an institution is just there for the self-perpetuation of an unjust system. Toni Morrison, here, seems to be in line with Catherine McKinnon who, writing about radical feminists, wrote "there was a woman's movement that criticized marriage and the family as institutional crucibles of male privilege... some criticized sex, including the institution of intercourse, as a strategy and practice in subordination" (259).

We see this when Cholly pushes his horribleness beyond human comprehension as he carries his folly even further by burning his own house and putting his family on the streets. Claudia's mother puts it aptly when she says "... that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head, and everybody, as a result, was outside." (17).

Patriarchy places the man at the head of the family, and considers him its rock of security and stability. But Morrison tries to tell us the contrary version of the narrative as she paints man as the source of insecurity in the home.

Claudia is horrified by these events. She says:

Cholly Breedlove, then a relenting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals, was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail. (19)

Cholly sets the pace for most of Toni Morrison's male characters to follow. He is a man with a fragmented life. Morrison even says that only a musician could make sense of the fragmented nature of Cholly's life; and Cholly himself is unable to make sense of or to find coherence in his own life since he lacks the sense of purpose to do so. And he has become a great liability to his own family as he causes his wife to lose the job of domestic servant she picks at the Fishers because he turns up there asking for money and frightening the white woman out of her wits. Polly says "Cholly came over by where I was working and cut up so. He came there drunk and wanting some money. When that white woman seed him she turned red. She tried to act strong-like but she was scared bad" (120).

This is how Polly loses her Job. The family is now stranded with one to pay the bills. As a consequence gas has been cut off. The white lady for whom she works asks her to file for divorce and ask for alimony but Polly is too uneducated to even understand. And even if she did, Cholly would be unable to pay any alimony because he possesses nothing.

Frustrated, homeless, hopeless, and nowhere to go, Polly resorts to "Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (126-27). "Crown of thorns" here is quite a telling image as it shows the incredible level of suffering that Cholly has inflicted on his own family. Instead of being its source of hope and strength, he is instead its own gravedigger.

He is not only a social misfit; he is, as well, an inveterate misogynist who has no respect for women. He wonders why any man should be required to have a single woman all his life: "To be required to sleep with the same woman forever was a curious and unnatural idea to him; to be expected to dredge up enthusiasms for old acts, and routine ploy; he wondered at the arrogance of the female" (166). This, because "The constantness, the varietylessness, the sheer weight of sameness" freeze Cholly's imagination and drive him to despair (160).

Cholly Breedlove's life is submerged in nihilism and anarchism. The only rules he does not break are those that do not exist. He is a free man; but his freedom is rather a dangerous one because it is the type of freedom preached by the nihilists. He is thus "Dangerously free" (159). He is totally dysfunctional with regard to fatherhood and his dangerous freedom from rules and responsibility leads him to commit one of the most horrible and disgusting acts imaginable – the rape of his own daughter. Pecola Breedlove is standing by the sink washing dishes; her mother has gone to the Fishers' where she works as a domestic servant. Cholly looks at his own daughter

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and starts having an uncomfortable feeling. His world is a topsy-turvy one and he is entirely controlled by his basic instincts. A forbidden desire then runs down his spine:

The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the length of his anus. [...] He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down his guts and fly out in her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then produced the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon. (162-63)

One realizes here that instead being a protective father to his daughter as patriarchy would have him be, Cholly has transformed himself into a rabid rapist violating his own daughter with gruesome impunity. It is only after the act that he becomes “conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn attempt to be free, or from other emotion, he could not tell” (163).

Cholly Breedlove has pushed his bestiality beyond the bounds of human imagination. This scene makes us wonder if we are reading a passage from one of Steven King's horror novels, or if we are watching a scene from one of Hollywood's third-rated x-movie. Cholly is a man devoid of any moral qualms. He does not really come to terms with the monstrosity of his act. As he ejaculates his demons are appeased and reality dawns on him: “Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could only see her grayish panties so sad and limp around her ankles” (163). Cholly Breedlove is one of (if not) Toni Morrison's most despicable character. He falls to the lowest limits of human civilization.

As a black female writer Morrison cannot be indifferent to the racial and the gender-related issues of her time and society. By painting a horrible character like Cholly Breedlove, Morrison is lampooning what according to her, are the unacceptable sexist injustices of her society where man's unwarranted brutality is exercised at will. She is also deconstructing the notion that the patriarchal system is protective of women because it takes into account their inherent biological weaknesses.

Cholly may be a Frankenstein's monster created by the racist and sexist society in which he finds himself, but he is a monster all the same. Even after this horrible act he does not show any remorse as his feelings are a mixture of hatred tinged with tenderness; though it is rather very ironical to talk of tenderness when a father violates his own progeny. The narrator says that “The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her” (163).

This means that Pecola cannot stand up after going through this hair-raising experience, and Cholly simply covers her and leaves – may be pricked by some remnants of a conscience that still lingers on. He is driven by some devastating animalistic urges. Claudia ironically calls this unnatural and hair-splitting crime perpetrated by a father on a daughter, love. She says: “He at any rate was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death” (206). But the love Claudia is talking about is a terrible one. It is far from the one that would have been a universal remedy for an embattled soul like Pecola's. Cholly's love is a far-cry from the forever-after love of fairytales, movies and popular fiction. It is the love between the kite and the chick. Morrison feels that the quality and consequences of love are determined by the character of the lover. Through Frieda, she makes a monumental statement:

Love is never better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. (206)

This is the case of Pecola Breedlove whose name could never be more ironical. She is shorn and destroyed by the one who is supposed to be her strongest pillar of support. Morrison uses the word “Free” to signify no attachments; having nothing to do with the mores and norms of society's civilized conduct. The free man in this case exists only for himself, for the indulgence of his needs and impulses. He is utterly unaware of the other person, and is totally unconcerned with the consequences of his actions on her or him. Because of this disconnection, the free man cannot give or contribute to the beloved's wellbeing. He can only destroy her. The image of the “eye” in the above quotation signifies that the beloved does not see herself and is not reflected in the eye of the freeman lover. In that case the beloved is depersonalized – reduced to a state of non-being. That is what Cholly does to Pecola, his own daughter.

Toni Morrison's subversion of the patriarchal narrative does not end with her caricaturistic depiction of Cholly Breedlove. Another male character with a horrible reputation in the novel is Elihue Micah Whitcomb (aka Soaphead Church). He is a misanthrope who lives on the fringes of the society. Mature human beings are rather disgusting to him, and he lives a life of seclusion like a hermit. But unlike a hermit whose seclusion is in order to attain a higher religious elevation, Soaphead is a man with a sick head, and a distorted mind. The narrator writes:

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His attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive to him - children. And since he was too diffident to confront homosexuality, and since little boys were insulting, scary, and stubborn, he further limited his attentions to little girls. They were usually manageable and frequently seductive. His sexuality was anything but lewd; his patronage of little girls smacked of innocence and was associated in his mind with cleanliness. (166-67)

Soaphead is not just a misanthrope; he is a paedophile as well. Like most men of his type, he is a coward. He goes for little girls because they are weak and defenseless. He cannot go for boys because they are truculent and cannot easily be controlled. The Whitcomb family pride itself on the refinement of its members, but paradoxically Soaphead is a cowardly child molester who hates mankind and whose sexuality is distorted and perverted. The narrator writes that "He could have been an active homosexual but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not occur to him, and sodomy was quite out of the question. [...] And besides, the one thing that disgusted him more than entering and caressing a woman was caressing and being caressed by a man" (166).

In spite of his distaste for women, he still accepts to get married to Velma for the sake of convenience. Very few people have any illusions as to the outcome of the marriage because it was clear that "he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene" (169). Thus just two months into the marriage, it crumbles as Velma discovers who Soaphead Church really is. She leaves "When she learned two months into the marriage how important his melancholy was to him, that he was very interested in altering her joy into a more academic gloom, that he equated lovemaking with communion and the Holy Grail" (170).

Soaphead therefore is a man of straw like most of the other male characters in Toni Morrison's works. He is profoundly dishonest and has no sense of shame. As such, when Pecola goes up to him saying she wants her eyes to be blue, he has no qualms in capitalizing on the little girl's craving to push forward his own agenda. He makes her entertain the illusion that such a monstrous wish can be realized. At first he feels pity for her:

He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. [...] of all the wishes people had brought him, money, love, revenge – this seems to him the most poignant and the most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. (174)

For the first time in his life Soaphead honestly wished he could work miracles. But faced with his own helplessness in the face of such a pathetic petition, he feels an outrage against God for not doing His job well. He then writes a letter to God telling Him about his love for little girls, their little breasts, and much more. He in this letter also criticizes God for having failed in His duty to mankind. He accuses God for never answering people's prayers (except Job's). As such, he (Soaphead) has decided to help Him. He then decides to play God by offering to give Pecola the blue eyes she yearns for. But in spite of this feeling he uses the opportunity to take advantage of the little girl's predicament to put forward his own selfish agenda. He sends Pecola with poisoned food to give to the neighbour's dog, Bob. He tells her: "Take this food and give to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one" (175).

Thus, Soaphead is a cowardly but heartless and extremely selfish individual. He capitalizes on Pecola's soul-searching predicament to make her fulfill his own wish. He is too cowardly to poison the dog himself but does not hesitate to make Pecola do it for him. He is nothing but a shaman capitalizing on the belief and credulity of the people to exploit them.

Toni Morrison's subversion of the patriarchal social order is total as even her minor male characters in *The Bluest Eye* are also portrayed as hopelessly immoral beings driven by their basic instincts. A case in point is Mr. Henry who is given shelter by the MacTeers. He is a social failure who cannot even provide shelter for himself. At the MacTeers he pretends to be a gentleman. He shows some interest in Claudia and Frieda – the two teenage daughters of Mr and Mrs MacTeer. He calls them using the names of renowned Hollywood female stars of the 1940s and 50s (the time of the setting of the story) such as Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers. His attitude endears him to the children because he seems to be the only adult who cares about how they feel.

However, one soon realizes that Henry is a wolf in sheep's clothing. He is a sexual predator who does not hesitate to attack Frieda. Like Soaphead Church, he is a paedophile lurking stealthily among children like a sly fox ready to attack its prey. Mrs MacTeer is flabbergasted by Mr. Henry's behavior. She drives him out of the house immediately. Her reaction is in stark contrast to the Breedloves who are a completely dysfunctional family that fails to give Pecola the protection she needs.

Toni Morrison shows that the family setup has a built-in bias against women's emancipation, and is made for the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance. As such, boys manifest a lot of irresponsibility right from their tender age. They know it is a man's world. But Claudia and her sister, Frieda, are not ready to accept this unjust dispensation. That is why they fight spiritedly to defend Pecola against groups of young bullies.

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Toni Morrison, as a feminist writer, is trying to subvert some of the patriarchal values prevalent in her society. In most works done by men at the time and before, women played mostly peripheral roles. But in *The Bluest Eye* she paints a contrary picture. She shows women as hardworking individuals fighting to improve their lot against all odds. She does not present flawless alabaster heroines, but rather realistic women straggling to build a place for themselves in an extremely difficult environment. She sees the patriarchal system as nothing but a set of shackles aimed at holding women down.

She continues this political subversion of the patriarchal system in *Sula* too as in most of her works. She paints a society where patriarchal values constitute the norms, where women are supposed to be submissive, and men strong and leaders of the community. However, like in most of her works *Sula* paints the picture of women who do not always abide by the roles, and men who are social failures and liabilities to the community. In this novel the character who really symbolizes Toni Morrison's attack on patriarchy and sexist stereotypes is BoyBoy. He epitomizes the hopelessly irresponsible nature of practically all the male characters of the novel. He is an inveterate wife molester, drunkard, and womanizer. He really lives up to his name because, though a man, his behavior is that of an immature person who knows not what he wants in life. That is why his marriage lasts just for five years: "After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage, BoyBoy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing first, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (32).

In spite of BoyBoy's cavalier behavior Eva does not run away. It is he who chooses to walk out on his wife and kids. He does not bother to ask himself what will become of his family now that there is no bread winner in the house. He leaves in the heart of winter, and there is nothing to fall back on, and the children too young to be left alone for hours. As such, it is difficult for Eva to pick up a job because it would imply leaving the children alone – the last being a suckling. And to make matters worse BoyBoy has earlier made Eva to cut off all links with her own family. So there is no one to come to her aid during these trying moments. Eva therefore finds herself in the position of someone abandoned by his personal "Chi" in the middle of a battle field, as China Achebe would say. The narrator writes: "The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding the three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry" (52).

However, contrary to patriarchal and sexist thought, Eva does not surrender to a life of self-pity and defeat. Though the black community comes to her aid, she knows that such solidarity cannot go on forever; she will soon outstay her welcome because her neighbours are not better off. They are poor and cannot add another month to feed to their already stretched financial resources. Eva therefore is in dire straits, but she waits until after winter when the smallest child is nine months old before she goes looking for a solution to her problems. Armed with the maximum that it is better to be envied than pitied, Eva leaves her children behind and, like Jason, she goes in search of the golden fleece. She goes away for 18 months. Then one day she comes back with clutches, gives Mrs. Suggs ten dollars for having taken care of her children; then she starts building a big house.

Eva's compellingly antideterministic temperament is another arrow in Morrison's bow in subverting the patriarchal system and sexist stereotypes. By making Eva successfully fight unaided, for a place for herself in the community, Morrison is in the process of deconstructing those patriarchal values prevalent in the society. However, Boyboy continues to be the epitome of hopelessness and irresponsibility. Not satisfied with having abandoned his wife and children, he comes back to taunt them, but to everyone's surprise Eva welcomes him and does not raise the issue with him: "When Eva got word that he was on his way, she made some lemonade. She had no idea what she would feel during the encounter. Would she cry, cut his throat; beg him to make love to her? She couldn't imagine" (35). But Boyboy, as his name implies, is a man with the reasoning faculty of a toddler. He comes with another woman to his estranged wife's house, and does everything to provoke her. He does not even ask after the children, and spends just little time because the city women he is moving with is waiting for him outside. He also puts on the air of an upstart who has made it in life, and who seems to wonder why some people cannot succeed like him. After sometime he rises to go "Talking about his appointments and exuding an odor of new money and idleness, he dances down the steps and stuttered towards the pea-green dress" (36).

In spite of Eva's civilized attitude, Boyboy continues to be provocative. He and the new woman do everything to make Eva angry as they behave in front of Eva's house like a newly-wedded couple on their honey moon: "Then he leaned forward and whispered into the ear of the woman in the green dress. She was still for a moment and then threw back her head and laughed. Big-city laughter that reminded Eva of Chicago. It hit her like a sledge hammer, and it was then that she knew what to feel." (36)

Here, Toni Morrison is deconstructing some of the central tenets of patriarchy. In this social order the man is the bedrock of the family. It is around him that everything revolves. But in *Sula* it is the contrary. The men are irresponsible individuals with no sense of purpose in life; the women, like Eva, are strong and ready to face whatever obstacle that stands on their way. Eva, for example, proves to be a woman with a legendary self-control in spite of Boyboy's provocation. After having hurt her the first time by abandoning her and the children, he comes back years after to taunt her. But contrary to patriarchal precepts and sexist stereotypes, Eva displays great

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self-control. She does not show any sign of anger. She welcomes him into her house and even offers him something to drink. She even feels sorry for Boyboy and his childish antics, because what she sees beyond this whole attempt to show off his newly acquired wealth is nothing but an admission of defeat. The narrator puts it clearly: "Eva watched. [...] underneath all of that shine she saw defeat... (36).

Like in *The Bluest Eye*, the men of *Sula* are mostly social failures with no home of their own. It is Eva who plays the role of the patriarch of the community. She epitomizes fortitude and responsibility. She offers shelter and food to those who cannot afford. Though she has lost a leg, she does not see herself as handicapped in anyway. Legend even has it that she intentionally had her leg chopped off by a train in order to receive the insurance money. There is nothing to corroborate the story but there is also nothing to deny it. However, with just one leg to move on, Eva continues to work hard to put her family on the right track and far from want.

Though Eva is capable of the greatest sacrifices for her children, she is also capable of the most desperate acts. A case in point is the burning to death of his son, Plum. Though she loves him with all her soul, she cannot sit and watch him drift down the drain. She is saddened to see what her son has become, and fears that he may one day commit the irreparable. She says: "I kept dreaming it. [...] One night it wouldn't have let him. [...] I have done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (71).

Eva believes it is far better to die honorably than to live a life of shame and humiliation. She loves her son very much but she prefers to have him dead than alive and be the symbol of failure and indignity in the community.

Eva's act is far from being that of a heartless, brutal woman; but it is rather the desperate act of a compassionate woman overwhelmed to see her son decidedly on a roller-coaster ride down the abysmal road to perdition. When she comes to the conclusion that nothing can be done to save Plum, she opts for the rather drastic measure of burning him to death. Many a person would consider Eva as a heartless woman after this incident; but a close look shows that Eva is an exceptional woman who would not hesitate to put her own life in danger in order to save that of her child. A case in point is when her first child, Hannah, is trapped in a burning house. Immediately Eva sees her ablaze, she doesn't give herself a second thought before flying to her rescue. The narrator describes the scene vividly:

She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance. Eva knew there was time for nothing else in the world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the window pane. Using her stump as support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing body. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke. (76)

Like the world, Eva is full of contradictions. At one point she is setting fire on her own son because does not one want him to live a life of shame and dishonor; and the next moment she is ready to give her life in exchange of her daughter's. Eva almost dies in the process. She wounds herself gravely. Mother and daughter are stretchered off to hospital. Eva is even unable to see because she is blinded by the blood oozing from the wounds on her face.

Eva's story is another attempt by Toni Morrison at debunking commonly held patriarchal notions which see the woman as a weak creature. We find in Eva a woman of great moral and physical strength. She is the wax that holds the family together. Though handicapped by the amputation of one leg, she does not sit and wait for manna to fall from heaven. She works hard and instead of begging from people, she is the one who offers them food and shelter.

Toni and Womanist Discourse in *Sula*

Though Toni Morrison is very critical of the institution of marriage as seen in *The Bluest Eye*, she still thinks it has its place in the society. We see this through Eva. Though she is a very hardworking and independent woman, her opinion about the institution of marriage is a far-cry from that held about radical feminists. Eva has suffered enormously as a result of her marriage to Boyboy who transformed her into a punching bag and who later fled away leaving her to take care of her children alone. However, she refuses to espouse the radical philosophy of most feminists who consider marriage as a patriarchal dungeon especially created to hold women hostage and to prevent them from achieving any goal in life. She is a true womanist who believes that it takes all to make the world. She feels that men and women both have their own weaknesses, and it is by accepting the weakness of one another that men and women can build a better, just, and purposeful world. That is why in spite of her own failed marriage, she keeps on encouraging her grand-daughter, Sula, to get married. She tries to make Sula see the importance of marriage and children on whom lies the hope for the continuity and sustainability of any society. During one hot exchange with Sula, she tells her: "Well, don't let your mouth start nothing that your ass can't stand. When you gone get married? You need to have babies. It'll settle you" (92).

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Here, Eva, like other womanists like Mary E. Modube Kolawole, Clenora Hudson-Weems, and Ama Ata Aidoo, tries to inculcate into her grand-daughter the values of womanhood and marriage because she feels that marriage and babies will make her responsible. But Sula is a self-proclaimed rebellious, nonconformist nihilist. And as always she tells Eva "I don't want to make someone else. I want to make myself" (92).

This statement is of paramount importance. It shows that Eva and her grand-daughter are at antipodal positions in relation to the role of the woman in a society. While Eva holds a womanist position which calls for greater freedom and emancipation for the woman, but which does not advocate the complete overthrow of the institution of marriage but rather its amendment for the betterment of the society, Sula totally rejects this position. She holds the view held by many radical feminists who reject marriage and childbearing because they are considered as by-products of a sexist patriarchal dominance. By saying that she does not intend to make someone else but herself, Sula is making a very strong political statement. She is thereby totally rejecting the institution of marriage and its cornerstone - the bearing of children which is central to the sustenance of every society and which radical feminists totally reject. But to Sula's radical statement Eva retorts: "Selfish. Ain't no woman got business floating around with no man" (92).

Toni Morrison is being very crafty here. On the face of things, she does not seem to take side with either the position held by Eva or with Sula's abrasive attitude. It is left to the reader to adopt a stand. But a closer examination of the issue makes one realize that Morrison is not advocating Sula's adversarial position as a solution to the prevalent feminist issues of her society and time; she is rather opting for Eva's middle-of-the-road position.

Another character through whom Morrison lambastes patriarchy and its bedfellow, marriage, is Helen Wright. She is a traditional woman who readily accepts her place in this male-dominated society. To her, the place of the woman is at home. A woman's ultimate goal in life should be to get married and raise children. She is thus in line with the patriarchal foundations of her society. She feels that when women go against their traditional roles in the society they are causing a disorientation of the natural order of things. As such, her daughter's marriage is the culmination all her life's dreams: "Her only child's wedding - the culmination of all she had been, thought or done in this world - had dragged from her energy and stamina she did not know she possessed. Her house had to be thoroughly cleaned, chickens had to be plucked, cakes and pies made, and for weeks she, her friends and her daughter had been sewing" (78-80).

Marriage therefore is a major achievement for a woman according to Helen Wright. But Morrison characterizes this view as a patriarchal invention. She wants women to understand that they can live a purposeful and fulfilled life with or without men. Marriage therefore should not be a woman's greatest quest. To her, the idea of marriage as a blissful institution for women is a patriarchal invention that holds no ground. To buttress this point, she paints Nel's marriage as a dismal failure. Her husband takes her best friend to their matrimonial bed, and shows no remorse when she catches them red-handed. He just leaves the house promising to send for his things later. He never comes back even if just to see how his children are faring.

Toni Morrison, as a realistic writer does not portray women as sexless alabaster virgins; she paints the picture of women in the real world with all their strengths and frailties. These women struggle to make a place for themselves in a difficult world. Sula, for example, is a thorn in the flesh not only of her mother and grandmother, but that of the other members of the community. Whenever any unfortunate incident occurs Sula is sure not to be far away. Eva, her grandmother, is convinced that it is Sula who burnt her own mother (Hannah) to death:

When Eva ... mentioned what she thought she'd seen to a few friends, they all said it was natural. Sula was probably stuck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mother burn up. Eva said yes, but inside her she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested. (78)

One realizes that in her quest for the freedom and emancipation of women, Morrison does not just opt for the glorification of women as faultless alabaster angels and the vilification of men as bad people. Her fight, therefore, is for the deconstruction of the sexist and patriarchal discourses which prevent women from expressing their full potentials. However, she is not out to romanticize or deify them. She just portrays them as human beings like anyone else.

Sula is a rebel not only against the social order, but against any kind of authority. As such, she is always at loggerheads with Eva (her grandmother) because she represents authority, something Sula abhors. She never misses an opportunity to copiously insult her grandmother, and when the latter tells her that nobody speaks like that, she hits back in an even more biting tone: "This body does. Just because you were bad enough to cut off your own leg, you think you got the right to kick everybody with the stump" (92-93).

This is rather a horrible thing to say when one thinks of the fact that in spite of her handicap Eva still fought hard to build a home for her children and herself, and that it is this home that offers shelter to Sula. But Sula's hatred for her grandmother stems from the fact that Eva represents authority in the eyes of Sula who hates authority like the plague. She is a self-opinionated nihilist who abhors whatever may stand on the way to the total expression of her freedom.

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Eva feels that her grand-daughter has misconstrued the essence of the whole talk about women's quest for freedom and liberation. She tells Sula that the "Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land that God gives thee" (93). But Sula instead retorts "Mama must have skipped that part. Her days weren't long" (93). And to crown it all, Sula threatens to burn up her grandmother: "Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just tiptoe up here with some kerosene and who knows - you may make the brightest flame of them all" (94).

This is a terrible threat to come from a granddaughter to a grandmother in whose house the granddaughter lives. To an African (feminist or not) such a statement is quite unpalatable. The image of Eva sitting on a wheelchair "flicking flies and swallowing spit" shows how old and helpless she is. And this makes Sula's threat all the more unacceptable.

One sees her that though Eva is a free and independent woman, she does not reject all symbols of authority. She even quotes from the Bible to advise her granddaughter against her wayward ways. Eva feels that to be free does not mean to hate everyone and to go against the entire social edifice. Her quoting of the bible is of paramount importance. It shows that her freedom is quite different from the anarchistic and nihilistic freedom propounded by certain radical feminists. Hers is a womanist vision of the world. But as for Sula, her grandmother's quoting of the bible makes her even angrier, and she makes a mockery of it by replying that if such were the case, then her mother, Hannah, certainly forgot to obey. That is why she died young. By making fun of this Biblical verse Sula is in line with the teachings of certain radical feminists who see the Bible as the manifesto of patriarchal dominance, and to whom the Christian doctrine is inimical to the women's liberation movement

CONCLUSION

We realize that Toni Morrison is a committed writer who does not proclaim the Kantian "art for art's sake, but art for a purpose; art at the service of a cause. She therefore writes to right the wrongs of her society. Contrary to Ralph Ellison, who says "I am a novelist not an activist" (Ndougoussa 65), Morrison is on a crusade against the patriarchal system and its bedfellow, sexism in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*.

Toni Morrison therefore subverts the patriarchal social order in her writings, and creates female and male characters whose attitudes towards the challenges of their various societies go a long way to proving that these patriarchal precepts have no greater substance than the Emperor's new clothes. She portrays men who are generally failures and social underachievers, who live like leeches on the commonwealth. Instead of being the beacon of light that the patriarchal system expects them to be, they are their societies' gravediggers, and mostly depend on women for survival. In opposition to these self-seeking male no-goods, Morrison's female characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are very purposeful and are often very ready to rise up to the challenges that come their way. By portraying her characters the way she does, Morrison is trying to demonstrate that patriarchal discourse is a monolithic philosophy that holds no ground.

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