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Between Gender Equality and Gender Complementarity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison evokes the notion of gender roles and gender relations explicitly and implicitly in her novel *Beloved*. She describes how the institution of slavery affects gender roles leaving deep scars in the African American family. This article discusses how Toni Morrison challenges the white patriarchal society by creating a new kind of gender relations. Using Alice Walker's womanist definition of gender relations, the findings show that in contrast to the white sexist society, Morrison establishes a plane of gender equality and gender complementarity which are necessary for the black society in order to fight racism and classism in the large American society.

Through *Beloved*, Toni Morrison recognizes manhood and womanhood as being not biologically but socially determined. She describes how the institution of slavery affects gender roles especially those of father and husband, mother and wife, leaving deep scars in the relations between African American men and women as well as in their conceptions of themselves. Concerning the black male protagonist Paul D slavery has emasculated him and effectively steals his manhood by forbidding him to make decisions or exist for himself. For the black female protagonist Sethe, her experiences take away her womanhood and her maternal sensibilities. She adapts conventionally masculine traits in order to ensure hers and her family's survival. Thus, both characters effectively take on the stereotypical characteristics of the opposite gender.

The imposed gender roles create terrible effects on the black man and the black woman gender relations. Neither the black woman accepts to be dominated by the black man, nor does the black man agree on being the non-authoritative figure in the family. Toni Morrison tries to resolve the debate over gender power by introducing a new kind of gender relations totally different from the patriarchal one. Through the exorcism of the character Beloved by the end of the novel, Morrison evokes the second climax in the story after the infanticide. The baby ghost who represents a threat to her mother Sethe, to her sister Denver and to the whole black community does no longer exist. After the different stories of betrayal, hate, domination and fear, *Beloved's* exhaustion initiates a new order in the black society.

The exorcism of the character Beloved rises Sethe's longing for death. She finds herself once again alone with her daughter Denver who works for their living. Paul D left 124 Bluestone Road, when he learns from Stamp Paid what Sethe did to her children. After the multiple promises he gives her; to stay with her, to take care of her and his wish to have a baby with her, he leaves her house because he cannot understand her act of infanticide. Paul D cannot understand a mother's love for her children nor the black woman's sexual exploitation which make her think that saving her children from the fate of slavery by way of murder is the most loving and protective act she can perform as a mother.

After a long period of thinking about slavery life he shared with Sethe, Paul D returns to reach the woman he loves. When he enters the house, he finds Sethe lying in Baby Suggs' death bed and waiting to die. She has no desire to live or to work for living anymore. She is singing the lullaby she creates for her children. Then she tells him that she is tired. She is expressionless and directionless, professing that she has "[n]o plans at all" (272). The statement reminds Paul D of what Sethe told him about Baby Suggs death and how she finally gave up. Consequently, Paul D realizes that he has to pull Sethe out of her resignation. Seeing Sethe's miserable state, Paul D attempts to save her.

Paul D offers to bathe her but Sethe can only protest that "[t]here's nothing nothing [...] Nothing left to bathe" (272). Without Beloved, Sethe believes that her body no longer exists. However, while Paul D starts bathing her, the way Baby Suggs did in a symbolic attempt to cleanse the dirtiest Sethe, a consciousness of her body begins to emerge.

[W]ater." He stops. "Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water?"
"And count my feet?" she asks him.
He steps closer. "Rub your feet."

Sethe closes her eyes and presses her lips together. She is thinking: No. This little place by a window is what I want. And rest. There's nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold? (272)

After the body, Sethe's spirit revives. Suddenly freed from the serious work of beating back the past, Sethe lets all the losses she has repressed flood into her mind, "that she called, but Howard and Buglar walked on down the railroad track and couldn't hear her; that Amy was scared to stay with her because her feet were ugly and her back looked so bad; that her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere" (272). Having confronted her grief consciously, Sethe quickly moves to put less into words by claiming, "she left me" (272). The act of acknowledging absence and saying "she" splits Beloved off.

Sethe continues by saying "she was my best thing" (272). Paul D, then, challenges Sethe's vision of herself and her children. He begins to convince her that she has access to subjectivity outside of the maternal, as he takes her hand and with the other he touches her face and says, "[y]ou your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). Through these words, he attempts to awake Sethe's self perception and the need for the detachment from her children. He strives to build herself conviction of her independent whole. Yet, Sethe answers, "Me? Me?" (273), expressing both surprise and disbelief. She also recognizes herself in the first person singular. It is nevertheless a crucial stage of affirming her individual separateness. According to Toni Cade Bambara, "[a] new person is born when he finds a value to define an actional self and when he can assume autonomy for that self" (Bambara 133).

Sethe's rescue through Paul D can be seen, at first glance, as the restoration of the traditional gender roles. The message here seems to be that in order to be feminine, one must be brought low. Sethe is no longer competent. According to Paul D's and the rest of the society's standards, a man could never be in that position. Therefore, Sethe can no longer be considered like a man. Moreover, if a woman was typically thought of as being weak and passive, then it must stand to reason that Paul D has regained his masculine status by finally managing to stage a successful rescue of a woman in extreme need of it. Paul D is finally able to be the savior of the woman he loves. Mary Paniccia Carden asserts that, "[i]n some ways, Paul D's rescue bespeaks a return to patriarchal scripts: we are left with a strong man bending

over the bed of a supine, weakened woman, promising redemption in a space safe for domesticity" (Carden, 421). Therefore, it seems that both parties have resumed their so-called "natural" gender roles.

However, rather than imposing his story on hers Paul D "wants to put his story next to hers" (273). "Next to" speaks of equality, which echoes the womanist call for an emphasis on black women as equal partners with men (Bates, 99). Paul D wants to establish a connection with Sethe and a non-patriarchal recognition of equality with her. Now, a black man and woman can come together and satisfy each other far from the conflict over who can dominate the other. Thus, Morrison rejects both the racist patriarchy that denies black men their masculinity and the individual men who accept such patriarchal definitions of manhood. By Sethe's rescue through Paul D, Morrison insists on the importance of man in African American womanist landscape. Obviously the black man cannot be ignored in female literature because he shares with women the racial oppression in a white racialized society.

Furthermore, Morrison insists on the importance of gender equality through Paul D's and Denver's joint responsibility. Paul D says to Sethe, "Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I'm a take care of you, you hear?" (272). Paul D's statement shows that he and Denver will have a joint responsibility, that of taking care of Sethe. Sandy Ruxton claims that, according to the UN General Assembly, "men must involve themselves and take joint responsibility with women for the promotion of gender equality" (Ruxton 4).

Paul D finally acknowledges that Sethe too has a story, for he "wants to put his story next to hers" (273). His statement shows the novel's emphasis on stories as constitutive of familial bonds. It is also important to understand why Paul D's story is told alongside Sethe's in the novel. While Sethe's story is central to the novel, Paul D is no less important. As Sethe defines what it means for her to be a woman, Paul D is defining for himself what it means to be a man. It is necessary for them to function together, through a joint effort, in order to reveal both manhood and womanhood. In other words, Paul D's and Sethe's discovery of self is not only a personal journey, but a joint discovery dependent upon one another. When they finally come together, there is evidence of connection, understanding and recognition of one by and of the other.

This connection between Sethe and Paul D is an integral part of their discovery of a new identity. Paul D and Sethe only find balance in their exploration together. It is here, at last, that Paul D is moved to claim kin, to honor not only Sethe, but the story they share. What each has suffered has to become joined with all the other narratives of suffering. How each has escaped has to become joined with all the other stories of escape. The description of the scars has to join with the descriptions of bathing and healing. Therefore, the two stories may complement and complete each other and together they might form a story different from the suffering of *Beloved's* story and form the tyranny of history that her story represents. According to Patricia Hill Collins, "African Americans are counseled to accept traditional gender ideology's prescription of complementary gender roles for men and women (strength and weakness), and to believe that, although these gender roles may be more difficult for African Americans to attain, such roles are nonetheless natural and normal (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 183). However, for her, "[c]omplementarity in and of itself need not result in inequality" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 220). Since gender equality does not mean sameness, gender complementarity can exist alongside gender equality.

Morrison considers women as equal partners with men with different roles in the family, each role is dependent on the other and thereby none is greater. Paul D wants to put his story next to Sethe's story in order to digest the past and one holds the pain of the other when it is

too much to bear. Therefore when both stories are read as one, the struggle of an entire culture is resolved. Sethe's and Paul D's complementarity echoes Walker's womanism which desires that man and woman should be in harmony in the home and in the society at large. It is a position of a compromise between the sexes. Womanism believes that man and woman have complementary roles and relationships (Obi, 421). What is lacking in the one is made good by the other and vice versa. The weaknesses in men are counterbalanced by the strengths in women and the weaknesses in the latter are made good by those of the former. A man or a woman alone is but half a human being. Only when they come together do they become a full being.

Throughout *Beloved*, Morrison criticizes the traditional values associated with male's dominance and offers a new understanding of gender relations. First, Paul D brings Sethe's awareness to herself. Thus Sethe starts recognizing her autonomy and starts loving her self. Then, the novel ends with the insistence on both gender equality and complementarity. Paul D wants to put his story next to Sethe's. On the one hand, "next to" emphasizes gender equality. On the other hand, Morrison insists on piecing the two stories together in order to become a whole. Thus, she also calls for gender complementarity. Therefore, *Beloved* resolves the black man's/black woman's conflict over gender power. Instead of dominating or being dominated by the other, a healthy relationship needs the notion of completing and being completed by the other as John Ruskin's statement:

"[w]e are foolish, and, without excuse foolish in speaking of the 'superiority' of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not; each completes the other and is completed by the other; they are nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depend on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give" (Ruskin, 51)..

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