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## **Disrupted Childhood: A Critical Study of Toni Morrison's *Love***

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### **Abstract:**

Toni Morrison, one of the most significant contemporary novelists of America expresses her antagonism against capitalism through their treatment of childhood. If she is unflinching in her depiction of victimization and oppression that are pervasive in various forms in America, then her novels also sympathetically meditate on the problematic of child abuse and exploitation. The present paper aims to make a critical study of Morrison's *Love* (2003) to show how the novel offers telling portrayals of children who are caught in the nexus of violence either as victims or perpetrators. Christine and Heed, the African American children in *Love* are left beleaguered by the capitalist forces that visit on their lives in different ways. The paper seeks to analyze how Morrison's novel focus on the class stratifications and ownership sensibility that the economically rising blacks unwittingly internalize, in the process aggravating serious crisis for the children. Discussing the self-destructive tendencies incurred by the protagonists in the novel, the paper will thus explore how the novelist advances a critique of the commercial progress of America that had adversely impacted the patterns of kinship, parenting, and thereby stifled the healthy development of children. To put in other words, the novelist undermines the ideology of innocence vis-à-vis childhood as a national obsession that often sidelines the real predicament of children in America. In so doing, the paper eventually posits Morrison as a notable humanist thinker whose committed responses argue for the necessity of compassion and responsibility that can only assuage the plight of children from the deleterious capitalist drives.

**Keywords:** oppression, ownership sensibility, parenting, compassion, humanism.

Toni Morrison, one of the most significant contemporary novelists, is often unflinching in her depictions of oppression that are pervasive in various guises in America. Notably, her fictions critically meditate on the problematic of childhood and child abuse. Intriguingly, she engages in demystifying the national obsession with the foundational ideals of innocence and bring to surface many social determiners such as class, race, and gender that stifle the natural growth of children. Morrison is sharply vocal about the hegemonic coercion of the African American children and depicts the deprivation, trauma, and violence that beleaguer the children. Morrison protagonists often suffer lonely and miserable childhood. Cases of abuse, parental neglect, torture, and sexual exploitation of the worst kind are unabashedly described. The

children, as Morrison shows, are not only robbed of their innocence but get virulently entangled in a nexus of violence. Hence, the victimized children in the novelist's canon are often found gravitating toward oppressive and self-destructive ends. Taking into account these aspects, the present paper aims to make a critical analysis of Morrison's *Love*. The paper seeks to show how the novelist throws searching light on the racial and class stratifications as interlocking machineries augmenting the ownership sensibility and commodifying attitudes toward the children. Finally, it posits that Morrison's humanist outlook endorses discourses of collective awareness and responsibility toward children necessary for a healthy citizenry in the increasingly capitalist culture.

Morrison's eighth novel *Love* (2003) realigns emphatically the theme of abusive childhood against the backdrop of intra-racial and class prejudices among the African Americans. While the piteous subjugation of black children in an overtly racial society has figured in earlier novels like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*, in this novel Morrison illustrates an extensive study of betrayed childhood when occasioned due to the internalization of capitalist ethos among the upwardly mobile community. An intriguing tale of a rich fifty-five year old Bill Cosey marrying Heed, a poor prepubescent black child, *Love* recaptures the horror of pedophilia on the African American children when perpetrated by a patriarch on this side of the color-line. Set around the civil rights era, Morrison's novel is about the formidable impact of such perversities which raises troubling questions about the safeguard and future of the black children. The novel moves beyond black/ white binaries and enunciates that the well-being of black children in America is not contingent upon the school integrationist policies or the economic upliftment of the subjugated community. More importantly, it depends on the complex constitution of classism, patriarchal, and other capitalist constructs that continue to usurp the minority community in America.

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is about socially and economically powerless African American parents who pass on their suffering to their children. *Sula* (1973) in dramatizing the eponymous heroine and her friend Nel in their childhood witness the death of Chicken Little, another black child but in keeping it a secret depict how the black children become helplessly complicit in the nexus of violence. *Beloved* (1987) recapitulates the painful narratives of slave children forcibly segregated from their families. *Love* proves to be a slight departure in the continuum as the novelist's focus is now more on the pathologies of the upper class blacks who horribly subjugate the children. In one sense, it is more akin to *Song of Solomon* (1977) in which the bourgeoisie set up of Macon Dead's family individualizes Milkman and thereby distances him from the rich communal values.

Importantly, *Love* obtains a strident critique of the ownership sensibility on the children. In the novel, it is most explicitly personified by Bill Cosey, proprietor of the "best known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast" (*Love* 6). Lavishly enjoying his enormous wealth and position, Cosey all through the text remains the most enigmatic and overwhelming figure. Ostensibly, as the narrative exemplifies, Cosey is "commanding" and "beautiful" (*Love*

36). No wonder, his male charisma wins over many female hearts and seeks their unquestionable surrender. Looming large in the lives of the women around him, Cosey's philandering habits elude social censure. Such an unconditional influence which easily co-opts, any female, however has its most disastrous effect on the lives of two girls Heed and Christine. His bizarre desire to marry Heed, an eleven-year-old who is playmate to his granddaughter Christine becomes the central act of usurpation that exhibits both his libidinal one-upmanship and sheer impetuosity. The poignance lies in Cosey's inhuman callousness that destroys both the minors. It not only debases the innocent bonding between the children but disparages the process of individual growth and becomes the cause of "radical discontinuity of Heed's and Christine's lives" (Wyatt 213).

Reprimanding Cosey's malevolence, Morrison offers a strident criticism of the black patriarchy as she rightly conceives it as a story of the "dragon daddies and false-hearted men" (*Love* 4). Analyzing the operation of social hierarchies in *Love*, Schreiber asserts that "the interpersonal dynamics in [this novel] point to the damaging narrative of patriarchal power in American culture" (106). Cosey, the patriarch in the novel, is not a protective authority but a confirmed wrong doer. By incriminating Cosey, the novelist condemns the capitalist sensibility as that seduces him to visualize women and children as commodities. So if Heed's "long legs" and "candle eyes" (*Love* 139) titillate Cosey the first time when he sees her playing with his granddaughter, then his entrepreneurial savvy incites him to 'buy' Heed from a poor Johnson family with a year's rent and a candy bar. Such a transaction offers a dismal picture of intra-racial oppression taking place among the African Americans. "Knowing that she had no schooling, no abilities, no proper raising, he chose [Heed]" (*Love* 72) as a passive being on whom he can unleash his lust. An instance of forced sexual consumption, Cosey's act symbolizes an extreme form of depraved paternity.

In the novel, Cosey's marriage with Heed and then his physical imposition perpetually snuffs out her innocence. Unable to comprehend the train of events that marriage sets in her life, Heed starts venerating Cosey and ironically enough even addresses him as "Big Papa"/"Daddy." Strangely, Heed even believes that her marriage with Cosey was a happy one as she later claims to Junior, her secretary: "I was lucky, I know that. My mother was against it at first. Papa's age and all. But Daddy knew a true romance when he saw it. And look how it turned out. Almost thirty years of perfect bliss" (*Love* 62). Moreover, later she gladly remembers her first sexual experience as "no penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees, and opened her legs to the surf" (*Love* 77-8). Heed's idea of romance testifies to a terrible psychic schism inflicted on her by Cosey's lustful invasion. Her predicament reflects a state of distressful victimhood in that it inculcates false notions of comfort and protection. Not surprisingly, she ruminates that the "truth to be told, Papa was the only person who did not make [her] feel" (*Love* 133) insecure at all. A victim of pedophilia, Heed's child psyche is warped by Cosey's authoritarianism. Sadly, she gains a new pride by boasting about her marital identity and

gradually turns into “grown up nasty” (*Love* 133) woman who tries to establish legal monopoly over her dead husband's property and thereby dismiss others' claims. Seen in this context, the novel lays bare the complex psychological underpinnings that develop in children as they come into knowledge of money and class.

Understandably, Heed's belligerence toward Christine, her childhood mate encompasses a strange psychological paradox. It signifies both a yearning for their pre-lapsarian bonding as well as a blatant display of her newly gained social mobility following her marriage to Cosey. If Heed mistakenly discovers a sense of empowerment in the Cosey household, Christine feels only defeated. She is coerced to undergo heartbreaking dispossession which permanently casts a shadow over her childhood. Suddenly thrust into new identities, Heed and Christine are compelled to refashion themselves in certain ways that damages their natural development. Quite ostensibly, Morrison expresses her vehemence against such abominable violence and repression by showing the neglect and sexual exploitation of the children. In different ways, Heed and Christine are victims of the venalities of the capitalist patriarchy.

If Cosey's tyrannical hold over little Heed symbolizes his proprietary mentality, then May's frantic obsession with her upper class status betrays how the aspiring blacks in complying with the capitalist ethos often put the lives of children to risk. May, Cosey's widowed daughter-in-law and mother to Christine, originally belongs to a family of itinerant preachers and her marriage with Bill Cosey's only son enables her mobility into a higher class. Predictably, she becomes insanely conscious as well as insecure about her class and desperately tries to assert her claim to it by distancing herself from the lower strata. To quote Bouson in this regard, “Morrison emphasizes, in the character of May, Christine's mother, the shaping and deforming influence of deeply entrenched middle class prejudices against lower class blacks” (363). Naturally, she willfully submits to Cosey's dominance, blinding herself to his patriarchal malevolence. In her recollections, L, the chef of Cosey's hotel resort and a narrator, provides a riff on May's dilemma: “If I was a servant in that place, May was its slave. Her whole life was making sure those Cosey men had what they wanted” (*Love* 102). Paradoxically, if May fails to castigate Cosey for exploiting Heed, she does not let an opportunity pass to “sabotage” the latter for being an intruder into the household. To add to the disaster, she fails to perceive Heed as a “child, [for her] she was [only] a Johnson” (*Love* 138). No less, she also “resent[s] the child” (*Love* 147) to “the point of blaming . . . [her] for a grown man's interest in her” (*Love* 147). Tragically, May's discrimination and hatred prove detrimental for both Heed and Christine. Frightened that her world would soon slip into irrelevance, May heaps up all scorn on poor Heed. Cursing Heed as a pernicious invader, a “snake” (*Love* 99) in the house, May detests her presence so much so that she sees the former as a bad influence on Christine. For May, Heed is a dangerous “bottlefly [who] let in through the door, already buzzing at the food table and, if it settled on Christine, bound to smear her with the garbage it was born in” (*Love* 136). Hurriedly then, May decides to segregate Christine from Heed and soon sends the former to a boarding school. The novelist clearly admonishes May's neurotic obsession with class that drives a wedge between children

and makes her complicit in their sexual exploitation. Simply stated, May's obsession with class aids Cosey's licentiousness in jeopardizing Christine and Heed.

As a child cast away, Christine had to combat the outside social forces and survive on her own. Rejected by both her grandfather and mother, Christine felt betrayed and isolated. Significantly, Morrison emphasizes the grievances that trouble the young Christine's mind. She was particularly vexed when Heed also "grinned happily when [Christine] was led down the hall to darkness, liquor smell, and the old business" (*Love* 133). Evicted from her room and banished from her family at such a tender age, Christine could never overcome the feelings of isolation and betrayal. May ironically dehumanizes Heed for a crime that consists in being patriarchy's victim and erroneously shields Christine only to blight her from within. Later, L, the cook laments the fact "I blame May for the hate she put in them [and] fault Mr. Cosey for the theft" (*Love* 200). The utter degradation of Heed's and Christine's adult behaviors testifies to their traumatic childhood. Perennially entangled in misunderstandings and confused identities, they fail to grow up as mature individuals. Tragically enough, they can neither love genuinely nor foster any constructive relationships. The aberrations in their personalities clearly reflect this fact. Heed and Christine, though they fight and try to outwit each other, remain vulnerable to predatory forces of the patriarchal world. Christine's wounded consciousness pushes her into a series of broken relationships and later makes her embrace misguided political activism. The desire to retrieve the home from which she was ousted as a teenager drives Christine to form several meaningless relationships. Christine's stay at the brothel, her loveless marriage with Ernest Holder, followed by an affair with a political activist, and the routine abortions she undergoes all signify the lingering effects of a joyless childhood. The trauma of dispossession runs so deeply in her psyche that Christine is unable to attain a stable persona. Eventually, when Christine returns to the Cosey household she can hardly form an easy relationship with May. The hatred implanted at the early age exacerbates as time passes. In a similar vein, Heed's violation though breeds illusions of comfort and security causes a psychic paralysis that she fails to overcome. No less, she wastes her life by avenging May and insulting Christine when the latter returns. Then, at the age of twenty-eight Heed pursues a wanton love affair with somebody called Knox, which leads to her pregnancy and subsequent realization that she has wasted her life in a loveless relationship. Such wobbly existence signifies the emotional vacuum and psychic fragmentation that has blighted the prime of their lives.

Morrison's novel thus offers a critique on the development of the black children, reminding the African Americans of the need for being nurturing parents and attaining economic stability. The healthy growth of black children is necessary for the empowerment of the African American community. Precisely, it is for that purpose that the novelist places the narrative against the backdrop of the civil rights era, a time when the blacks were fighting for equal rights and social acceptance. Invoking class ramifications, Morrison argues that the welfare of community is related with the secure future of the African American children. In the novel, the traumas they experienced as children reduce Heed and Christine to orphanhood for the rest of

their lives. Not only do they undergo separations and displacement but unwittingly get ensnared into the vicious cycle of class, social status, and property. Wasting their lives in yearning and fighting for Cosey's wealth, they sadly realize at the end that "[Cosey] took all [their] childhood away" (*Love* 194). For Morrison, the metaphorical orphanhood that Heed and Christine experience is symbolic of the social paralysis of the African American community itself.

Accordingly, the novel sounds the African American parents of the capitalist ethos that reifies human relationships. Indicting May for being a bad mother, Morrison repudiates the class-biased education that the black parents themselves often subscribe to. Sadly, May's ways of educating Christine at first in the Cosey household and then the decision of sending her to a boarding school is just to infuse in her a consciousness for the hierarchy dividing the colored people and niggers. Dangerous in the end, such education cripples Christine permanently. On the contrary, as a model of proper parenting in the novel, Morrison promotes the notion of father/patriarch not only as the provider but more importantly as the nurturer and responsible citizen. As early as 1983, in speaking to Nellie McKay about the female characters in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison claims:

Hagar does not have what Pilate had, which was a dozen years of a nurturing, good relationship with men. Pilate had a father, and she had a brother, who loved her very much, and she could use the knowledge of that love for her life. Her daughter Reba had less of that, but she certainly has at least a perfunctory adoration or love of that . . . Hagar has even less because of the absence of any relationships with men in her life. She is weaker. (Taylor- Guthrie 144)

In *Love*, such a parental role is epitomized by Sandler who counteracts both Cosey's perversities and May's penchant for class alliances. Sandler's wisdom coupled with pragmatic knowledge about the psychology of teenagers is noteworthy. In thoughtfully negotiating with his grandson Romen through accepting his bouts of sexual attraction yet inculcating in him a sense of dutifulness, he fulfills Morrison's expectations of a responsible elder. Unlike the other elders in the novel, Sandler and Vida correctly balance warmth with instruction that makes Romen "an emotionally mature and socially sturdy individual" (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan 10). Sandler's guardianship is informed by his rejection of gender and class distinctions. So, though he would accompany Cosey in his fishing trips he was far from being comfortable with the sense of class that the former promoted:

It was the talk, its tone, its lie that he couldn't take. Talk as fuel to feed the main delusion: the counterfeit world invented on the boat; the real one set aside for a few hours so women could dominate, men would crawl, blacks could insult whites. Then they docked . . . Then the sheriff could put his badge back on and call the colored physician a boy. Then the women took their shoes off because they had to walk home alone. (*Love* 111)



Sandler's eschewing of class prejudices is remarkable in negating the ownership temperament evidenced in other elders. Though Sandler brings up Romen in absence of his parents, he is neither despotic nor does mislead him to develop any obsession for money or class. He was rather careful that Romen should not be taken in by the atmosphere of excesses that characterized the Cosey household. Sandler's stable persona and wariness of capitalist enticements unmistakably establishes his reasonable citizenry and exemplifies a way of resolving the dilemmas that parents in contemporary times face.

Thus, Morrison through the turbulent childhood of her protagonists critiques the erosion of family and parenting, and economic inequities as interrelated factors informing the tragedies falling on the innocent lot in America. The author decries the debilitation of parental duties and child-rearing that has left the children in disarray. Speaking to Charles Ruas, Morrison expresses her consternation:

Nobody likes them, all children . . . I feel my generation has done the children a great disservice. I'm talking about the emotional support that is not available to them anymore because the adults are acting out their childhoods. They are interested in self-aggrandizement, being "right" and pleasures. Everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth. There may be a whole lot of scorned people, but particularly children . . . They are beaten and molested; it's an epidemic. (Taylor-Guthrie103)

While Morrison questions the cultural practices beginning from the welfare systems to the educational strategies as inappropriately addressing the problems of child abuse and rehabilitation, the present study of *Love* also shows her indicating ways to abate the precarious status of children. Morrison makes it abundantly clear that perspectives must be developed on a collective level which must be informed by emotional reinforcement, social nurturance, and education free from classism. If Morrison articulates the orphaned plight of the African American children, her stringent attacks on commercialization of childhood and parenthood are of much value for societies reeling under the capitalist enticements. Corresponding to her humanist insights, Morrison's novel appeals a revisal in the social attitudes toward children and problematic of child abuse. In so doing, the novelist implicates a collective responsibility for ensuring holistic growth of children, in turn duly elucidating her reformative humanist leanings.

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