

“AND SHE WAS LOVED”: TRAUMA AND TESTIMONY IN TONI MORRISON’S  
*SONG OF SOLOMON*

By

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Trauma narratives gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of trauma studies as a valid disciplinary field of academic study. No longer relegated to the field of medicine, the study of trauma allowed for better contextualization of the social, political, and economic issues, which stimulated the onset of the traumatic experience in fields ranging from psychology to literature. While Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* has generally been critiqued as a novel concerning the identity formation of the male protagonist, it can also be read with an understanding of trauma and its relationship to feminism, psychoanalysis, and race studies. To that end, this thesis seeks to scrutinize the female characters in *Song of Solomon* by examining the effects of trauma on the female body. Rather than using trauma studies as merely an approach at elucidating a character analysis, this work intends to examine the verbal signification, or testimony, of the traumatized subjects as a means to better comprehend the experience and reveal trauma as an instrument of female oppression within the novel.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Generally, one looks to the epigraph of a novel to get some hint of what is to come within the text. The epigraph to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* reads, "The fathers may soar and the children may know their names" (1). The obvious omission within this statement is the women. While much of the theoretical discourse concerning the novel deals with Milkman's quest for identity, naming, and ancestry few focus on the trauma and grief suffered by the female characters. Although the quest is not theirs, most of the females are unable to live authentically or reach a sense of self-definition without being valued by a male. Traumatized by being removed from a male embrace many of the women fall into a state of self-destruction. By utilizing trauma as a framework for reading Morrison's text, this thesis attempts to relocate psychoanalysis in the unfamiliar territory of race and gender. It is with an understanding of trauma that one can begin to understand how the women in the text operate. This thesis will focus on the women in the novel with regards to the trauma they experience and their testimony of the trauma. As Christina Zwarg agrees, "Until very recently, critics have been reluctant to deploy the critical legacy of psychoanalysis in their reading of African-American texts. Certain political imperatives and concerns have supported this hesitation; all too often the presupposed subject of psychoanalytic criticism has been white, bourgeois, and male" (1). This reluctance leaves African American literary criticism at a disadvantage. However, as Zwarg continues, trauma study is now allowing psychoanalysis to be used

within the study of race. “Indeed, trauma has emerged as the issue most valuable for showing the blindness and insight of Freud’s legacy” (1).

## CHAPTER 2 LOCATING TRAUMA STUDIES

The study of trauma has a long and chaotic history. The word “trauma” originates from the Greek word *titrosko* meaning “to wound” and before the nineteenth century it was used exclusively within medical fields. Michael Roth explains, “In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it gets reinvigorated as a psychological category meant to point to things that wound us in ways that cannot be traced physiologically. The concept appears in wartime in World War I as ‘shell-shock,’ after the Second World War as ‘battle fatigue,’ and after Vietnam as ‘post traumatic stress disorder’” (par. 6). It was not until 1980 that the American Psychiatric Association finally recognized the phenomenon of trauma, as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) “including the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes” (Caruth 3). According to the DSM-IV, trauma is defined as an event in which both of the following were present (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. From this definition we see that trauma not only involves some type of danger, it is also characterized by a sense of powerlessness for the individual. That powerlessness causes a wound to the individual’s psyche.

Recently, we see the word being used in a number of disciplines ranging from psychology to literature. Cathy Caruth explains, “The phenomenon of trauma has seemed

to become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience” (4). The gaps mentioned by Caruth take on a significant role in the understanding of trauma. Filling in the gaps is the job of the psychiatrist or psychologist in the case of therapy and the reader in the case of narratives of trauma to interpret the full meaning of the testimony given by the victim. In this way we must think of the recovery or remembering of trauma given in testimony as nonlinear. It returns fragmented, in pieces that must be interpreted.

By understanding the testimony of the victim readers may better understand the motivations of Morrison’s characters. In attempting to study trauma within the novel *Song of Solomon*, I will comply with a definition of trauma more in keeping with Morrison’s view of the Black experience in America, rather than a psychiatric definition because (as mentioned earlier) race has been widely excluded from the study. As Barbara Hill-Rigney describes, “Her characters are both subjects *of* and subject *to* history, events in ‘real’ time, that succession of antagonistic movements that includes slavery, reconstruction, depression, and war [ . . . ] For, in her terms, history itself may be no more than a brutal fantasy, a nightmare half-remembered, in which fact and symbol become indistinguishable” (61). Hill-Rigney posits Morrison’s traumatized individuals as victims of an already established world, which is out of their control. When asked about trauma being passed on through generations Hortense Spillers answers,

In some ways I don’t believe in the collective unconscious, or racial unconscious, because if that were true then that means that we will all never be anything but haunted, each generation. [ . . . ] I do think that there is a body of history that’s coded for memory, and that is what’s being passed down in some symbolic and



discursive and narratological sense; [. . .] But the body of history is something I would like to think about, the palpable nature of memory and how that gets passed on. (Haslett par.28)

Thinking of trauma in this sense, as a product of “the Black experience,” becomes particularly relevant when discussing the trauma experienced by the character Hagar in the novel. It is almost as if she is a reincarnation of a distant female relative who has fallen victim to the same trauma. Being left by the man she loves also traumatizes Ryna, her great grandmother. Being abandoned becomes something that many of the women encounter and their lives become colored by the pain of that event. Trauma then can be discussed as a type of inheritance. Although it is unwanted, it is nevertheless bestowed.

While all the women in Morrison’s novel experience some type of trauma, greater attention will be paid to the trauma inflicted upon Ruth and Hagar. How they choose to acknowledge the traumatic occurrence is heard in their testimony. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison discusses a trauma that all too many African Americans encounter. “Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That’s a trauma” (qtd. in Matus 23). For Morrison, the experience of racism for Blacks is a type of trauma. But the same can be said for gender. Connecting the discussion of trauma to the fiction of Toni Morrison, Jill Matus asserts, “But if we are to consider the question of Morrison’s fiction as testimony to the trauma of racism and to a history often erased or forgotten, we need to think about both the meaning of trauma and the special nature of literary testimony as opposed to, for example, testimony in a courtroom” (23). Matus sets up a very important challenge, for within *Song of Solomon* the female testimony is not an accurate record of the events as they took place, it is instead an outpouring of emotion because of the event. It is a bearing witness to the pain.

The basic trauma that Morrison sets up in the novel is the trauma of loss, particularly loss of a male the women love and trust. But this is not to say that the men in the novel do not experience this same loss. They too are victims of the abandonment of a male figure. However, we see that it is the women who experience greater suffering because of the desertion. For the women it is not simply as a loss, it is a rejection. Because they place their value in the hands of men, that rejection has the power to inflict great damage to the female. We must question this power that the male characters in the novel wield over the females. Why is it so detrimental to their psyche? I would posit that the difference resides in how they deal or attend to the trauma inflicted.

Morrison's epigraph quickly alerts her reader to the detail that flight is represented as a traditionally male action. The myth of the Flying Africans, which the novel brings into play, dates back to some of the earliest recorded slave accounts. According to Carl Jung, flight symbolizes "man's [sic] need for liberation from any state of being which is too immature, too fixed or final" (qtd. in Wilentz). Historically speaking this myth functions as a symbol of African transcendence as resistance to a life of enslavement. While crossing the Atlantic, en route to America, and while on the country's soil, Africans experienced many instances of abuse. They soon understood what their lives would be like in America. Some chose flight. But this feat does not come without a price. As Jill Matus explains, "For every joyous escape, every transcendent flyer, there is a grounded wife or mother" (78). In this statement is the enduring dichotomy of flying men and grounded women. As an enduring image in the text Morrison bookends the novel with flying men.

Matus also maintains one of the things that defines trauma is that memory and interpretation are not factual. They are susceptible to forgetting and distortion. Citing Allan Young, she calls trauma “a disease of time” (24). The female victims remain trapped in a traumatized state, which they are unable to remove themselves from without the return of men to value them. “The quintessential ‘blue note’ in the Solomon myth is Ryna, whose weeping and wailing symbolises the distress of those left behind” (78). Ryna’s cries are left to reverberate across the ravine. Hearing and interpreting Ryna’s, as well as, the moan of the other deserted women is left to the reader. Morrison’s narrator offers only fragments of a half remembered song throughout the novel for the reader to decode along with Milkman. But, if we are given only the pieces of the traumatic story, how are we to be certain of our translation of it?

In “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” Geoffrey H. Hartman reports, “Trauma theory introduces a psychoanalytic skepticism as well, which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a *traumatic* kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion” (537). So, when committing to doing trauma study it is with the understanding that some things will remain undisclosed. Hartman confirms that within the study one cannot count on certainty, but must, rather, attempt to “read the wound” (537). Morrison is very skilled at presenting the wounded female body in many of her novels. Speaking particularly of Black women’s literature, Mary Helen Washington writes, “In this literature we hear the voices of those who are unheard in this culture; we see the faces of those this society has made faceless; it makes visible those who have been rendered invisible” (Wade-Gayles 199). Morrison gives voice to the women in *Song of Solomon*

who have experienced traumas of abuse, rejection and abandonment. By allowing them to testify to their pain, Morrison provides a possible medium for healing the wounds.

### CHAPTER 3

#### READING (T)RUTH WOUNDS INFLECTED UPON THE FEMALE BODY

Ruth Foster Dead is unarguably one of the most physically and mentally wounded women in the novel. By the age of sixteen she is married to Macon Dead and by the time she is twenty he has stopped touching her. His refusal of her is brought on by the events surrounding her father's death. However, Ruth and Macon both have dissimilar accounts of what actually took place on that day. Macon does admit to his son that he never really loved Ruth, saying, "I can't tell you I was in love with her. People didn't require that as much as they do now" (70). And given the lack of affection for her, there was no emotional connection to stop him from truly despising Ruth because of her relationship with Dr. Foster.

The relationship between Ruth and her father is quite disturbing. Her mother dies while Ruth is still a child and she steps into the role of the woman of the house. But as she gets older her behavior towards her father becomes rather irksome.

Fond as he was for his only child, useful as she was in his house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling, and she had never dropped those expressions of affection that had been so lovable in her childhood. The good-night kiss was itself a masterpiece of slow-wittedness on her part and discomfort on his. At sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at night, sit on her bed, exchange a few pleasantries, and plant a kiss on her lips. Perhaps it was the loud silence of his dead wife, perhaps it was Ruth's disturbing resemblance to her mother. More probably it was the ecstasy that always seemed to be shining in Ruth's face when he bent to kiss her—an ecstasy he felt inappropriate to the occasion. (23)

This inappropriate behavior would certainly fall in line with the characteristics of Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. According to Freud young girls have an original

attachment to their mothers; however, “She makes the shift from mother-love to father-love only because she has to, and then with pain and protest. She has to, because she is without the phallus” (Mitchell 96). And it is only by the transference of her love from mother to father that the girl becomes a woman. The transition is probably easier for Ruth because of her mother’s death. The absence of the mother figure makes the transfer possible. Ruth’s complex is represented in her undying love and devotion for her father, but from the previous passage it is obvious that this attachment resembles a near incestuous relationship. And Dr. Foster is more than happy to marry her off to Macon.

What is also evident in the passage is that not only is Ruth emotionally involved with her father, the relationship is somewhat reciprocal. Dr. Foster does not stop coming to her; he does not stop kissing her. Later when Ruth becomes pregnant Dr. Foster delivers both of her female children against Macon’s wishes. When telling the story to Milkman he utters, “And both times he was there. She had her legs wide open and he was there. I know he was a doctor and doctors not supposed to be bothered by things like that, but he was a *man* before he was a doctor” (emphasis added 71). Macon’s words elicit two interesting points to be considered. First, the reader gets what appears to be disgust based on the possible incestuousness of Ruth’s relationship with her father, but jealousy can also be inferred from his thoughts. It is not so much that it is her father, but simply that it is another man between his wife’s legs, that bothers him. He goes on to explain to his son that he felt like it was Ruth and her father against him.

When Dr. Foster is on his deathbed Macon makes a startling discovery. When he enters the room he recounts, “In bed. That’s where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and

skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth” (73). The cold fingers penetrating Ruth’s mouth are symbolic of the possible sexual relationship Macon believes them to have had. Uncertain as to whether Dr. Foster had an incestuous relationship with his wife, he tells Milkman, “Nothing to do but kill a woman like that. I swear, many’s the day I regret she talked me out of killing her” (74). There is no doubt that hearing this story has traumatized Milkman in some way. While he had never had any strong feelings of love towards his mother, Milkman wonders about the validity of the story. In trying to reconcile the story within himself he remembers (in fragments) being nursed by his mother. As Caruth points out, “Indeed, the literal registration of an event—the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail—appears to be connected, in traumatic experience, precisely with the way it *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs” (153).

It falls to Ruth to explain the truth behind the memory of her nursing him as well as the story concerning her father. She tells him how Macon had, in fact, killed her father by throwing his medicine away. She even tells Milkman how Macon attempted to kill him while Ruth was still pregnant. After Dr. Foster’s death Macon and Ruth no longer share a bed. “I thought I’d really die if I had to live that way. With nobody touching me, or even looking as though they’d like to touch me,” Ruth declares. “I was twenty years old when your father stopped sleeping in the bed with me” (125). Interestingly, it is not the absence of their sexual relationship that Ruth begins with; it is with his refusal to touch her. By not even attempting to lay a hand on her, Macon treats Ruth as if she is untouchable, a diseased person, who could contaminate him if he came into contact with her. By the age of thirty, having touch and sexual pleasure removed from the marriage for a decade now,

Ruth acknowledges her fear that she would “die that way” (125). Here Morrison sets up lack of intimacy as a type of traumatizing rejection inflicted upon the female body.

Nursing Milkman became, for Ruth, a way to hold on to some measure of pleasure in her life. “She felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she was a cauldron spinning gold” (13). Ruth continues this daily in a small room that her father had used as a study until Freddie the janitor discovers her. It seems almost fitting that a man would be the one to remove that intimacy and enjoyment from her life once again. Once Pilate comes to town she intuitively senses a problem between the married couple and questions Ruth, “Do you want him?” Ruth responds, “I want somebody” (125). Dying from lack of physical contact and emotional closeness, Ruth follows all of Pilate’s magical instructions. Ruth believes she can get Macon to value her again if sex is reintroduced into the marriage. And within four days Macon comes to her as if in a trance. Once Macon awakens from his “sexual hypnosis” and realizes that Ruth is pregnant, he does everything he can think of to abort the baby.

The traumatic events that Ruth now endures at the hands of her husband are far worse than when he would not touch her at all. Initially Ruth believes that the baby would be something to bring the two of them together, but she soon realizes otherwise. Instead the pregnancy brings something entirely different into their relationship.

Then the baby became the nausea caused by the half ounce of castor oil Macon made her drink, then a hot pot recently emptied of scalding water on which she sat, then a soapy enema, a knitting needle (she inserted only the tip, squatting in the bathroom, crying, afraid of the man who paced outside the door), and finally, when he punched her stomach (she had been about to pick up his breakfast plate, when he



looked at her stomach and punched it), she ran to Southside looking for Pilate. (131)

In keeping with the characteristics of traumatic recollection, these repressed memories come flooding back only when Ruth learns of Hagar's murder attempts on Milkman. This can be considered normal behavior for a trauma victim. As Vickroy explains, "Fundamental to traumatic experience is that the past lingers unresolved" (12). She goes on to assert that there are many "triggers or associative conditions that cause returns to traumatic events" (12). Hagar's attempts at Milkman's life instantly return her to another time when she had to fight for his survival. But the emphasis of her memories is not placed on the abuse, but rather on the sex act that precedes it. As the narrator reveals, "Her passions were narrow but deep. Long deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation, she saw her son's imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to" (134). Hearing of Milkman's impending death, she does not focus on a time when her life was in jeopardy. Rather, she remembers the moment when she was in Macon's arms. This clearly relates to Ruth's perception about the trauma that she has experienced. She has repressed the trauma by disassociating her need for male attention from the physical abuse inflicted upon her body.

Ruth fights for Milkman's survival, but not her own. The reason may be found in her testimony, which she spills out to Milkman earlier in the novel. "...I am a small woman," she utters. "I don't mean little; I mean small, and I am small because I was pressed small" (124). In the confines of her father's house and in comparison to him she is made inconsequential. The people in their community refer to her as "Dr. Foster's daughter." She is not her own person. Her existence is directly related to her father. Ruth's repetition of the word "small" as a self-descriptor points to her low self-esteem.

And living in the same house under the reign of Macon, she has undeniably been pressed even smaller even before the trauma. While Ruth has physically survived the trauma, she is merely a disjointed individual. Vickroy notes, “A diminished, even shattered sense of self is common in cases of severe trauma of any sort but seems particularly prevalent in accounts of domestic tragedies and sexual abuse” (23)

## CHAPTER 4

### HAGAR'S STORY: PRIVATE PAIN AND PUBLIC MANIFESTATIONS OF TRAUMA

With reference to Hagar's attempts to take Milkman's life, I wish to digress to the traumatic event that precipitated her rage. In the novel Morrison portrays the incestuous relationship between cousins Hagar and Milkman. Upon their first meeting Pilate introduces Milkman to Hagar as her brother. Reba, Pilate's daughter, corrects her, saying, "That ain't her brother, Mama. They cousins." Pilate responds, "Same thing." Hagar joins in the conversation asserting that there is a difference between the two. Pilate then corrects her by asserting, "I mean what's the difference in the way you act toward 'em? Don't you have to act the same way to both?" (44). In this scene Morrison sets up early on that family is family no matter how they are connected. Realizing that Milkman's relation to Hagar should be considered that of a brother emphasizes the incestuous nature of their sexual relationship that will occur years later.

Therefore, Milkman quickly takes to Hagar. "From the time he first saw her, when he was twelve and she was seventeen, he was deeply in love with her, alternately awkward and witty in her presence" (92). Being five years his senior she initially pays him little attention. But after some time they consummate the relationship. "When he first took her in his arms, Hagar was a vain and somewhat distant creature. He liked to remember it that way—that he took her in his arms—but in truth it was she who called him back into the bedroom and stood there smiling while she unbuttoned her blouse"

(92). As an older woman Hagar is in control of the situation. Milkman is no more than a “puppy” in love with a woman.

Ten years later Milkman has become disillusioned by her. “Now, after more than a dozen years, he was getting tired of her. Her eccentricities were no longer provocative and the stupefying ease with which he had gotten and stayed between her legs had changed from the great good fortune he’d considered it, to annoyance at her refusal to make him hustle for it, work for it, do something difficult for it” (91). Milkman no longer has to chase Hagar. Even now he does not “take” Hagar, as he desires to do; she willingly gives herself to him. She has opened herself up to loving him. Why would she refuse him? Morrison does not write many scenes of the two lovers; in fact, except for their juvenile meetings the only time they are together is when she is attempting to kill him. By not allowing the reader to see them in a loving manner together Morrison de-emphasizes the relationship, possibly in much the same way that Milkman does. Whenever their relationship is discussed it is in terms of their sexual relationship. This directly relates to the fact that Milkman is only interested in her sexually; beyond that, he does not value her.

After Milkman realizes that he no longer wants Hagar, he describes her as the “[T]hird beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it’s there, because it can’t hurt, and because what difference does it make?” (91). But it can hurt and all too late Milkman realizes how much his carelessness has hurt Hagar. Before coming to this understanding he is resolved to end the relationship during the Christmas holiday. Milkman writes Hagar a thank you note for their time

together and signs it with gratitude. He takes away the one thing that he can control, himself. This removal hampers Hagar's existence in many ways.

Hagar suffers from an addiction to Milkman. As the novel progresses so does her addiction. Charlotte Eliza Kasl defines addiction as "a spiritual breakdown, a journey away from the truth into emotional blindness and death" (qtd. in Schaef 10). Hagar surely falls under this definition. She is so far removed from the truth of her life. She does not understand that she can be a whole person without Milkman to value her that she does not know how to behave without him. Trauma relates to addiction in that the sufferer looks towards something or someone to help forget the pain inflicted upon them. Hagar, however, is addicted to the one person who has caused her pain. Schaef explains three different types of addiction: sexual, romantic, and relationship addiction. Hagar's violent behavior places her in the category of someone suffering from a relationship addiction. While the first type of relationship addiction deals with a person being addicted to any relationship, real or imagined, within the requirements of the second type "a person is addicted to a *particular* relationship with a particular person" (75). Hagar exhibits many of the symptoms that Schaef outlines such as fear of being alone, controlling behavior, and selective amnesia, a symptom that allows the sufferer to selectively forget the bad parts of the relationship. Hagar is overtaken by what is described by the townspeople as a "graveyard love," explaining, "They had seen women pull their dresses over their heads and howl like dogs for lost love" (128). While Hagar has not resorted to this behavior, she has committed many acts of terror. Schaef goes on to state,

Relationship addicts are constantly anxious and depressed. Since they have made the relationship the source of their validity, meaning, and security, they *must* hold on to it [ . . . ] As relationship addicts become increasingly aware that they cannot control the relationship, they become more and more desperate, often making

accusations and precipitating battles, with concomitant feelings of desperation. (78-9)

Hagar has completely lost herself in her pursuit of Milkman. She knows nothing but the love she feels for him. “She loved nothing in the world except [Milkman], wanted him alive more than anybody, but hadn’t the least bit of control over the predator that lived inside her. Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own” (136-7). While she does experience love and is valued in the female-centered home of Pilate, she has not been taught about the outside world; she cannot function outside of the home. Pilate and Reba have always given Hagar everything she has desired, which only works to strengthen a particular symptom of addiction, the belief that she can make the relationship happen simply by desiring it. But Milkman does not want Hagar and she is unable to cope without him in her life.

It is evident that it is not only care or nurturing that Hagar desires because she receives that from the two maternal figures in her life, Reba and Pilate. Both women share the responsibilities of raising Hagar. Under Pilate’s roof Hagar has flourished. She has not had to want for anything. But this all-consuming mother love has in many ways hampered Hagar’s life. Gary Storhoff writes, “*Song of Solomon* is a portrait of enmeshment—the suffocating bond parents occasionally create with their children that Morrison calls ‘anaconda love’” (Bloom 210). While parental enmeshment is seen in the rearing of Hagar, Milkman also falls victim to enmeshment in Macon’s home. But this commonality is not enough to keep them together; it is not a source of bonding. If anything, this enmeshment works to destroy the relationship. The separate home life of Milkman and Hagar has made them self-centered, controlling, and unable to discover an authentic self. Fortunately, Milkman has the ability to find himself through the quest.

Hagar does not have this ability because, historically speaking, it is the men who go off on the quest while the women remain at home. Pilate proves to be the only exception to this. Pilate has quested throughout the novel, roaming around after she is separated from Macon after their father's murder. But she finally decides to settle in Macon's town because Hagar needed a family. Pilate is wise enough to realize that a life on the road is no life for a child. Settled in a new home, Pilate creates a home better suited to raise a child. While Hagar's home is matrifocal and nurturing, Ruth's is not.

The home is traditionally thought of as a female domestic space. Macon's family lives in the home of Ruth's late father. While Ruth should have inherited the house after her father's death, it is more Macon's home than hers. The people in the community describe it as big and dark, "more prison than palace" (10). And Macon enters the novel in much the same way as a violent husband returns home to his abused wife. "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 every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices" (10). The negative feelings that Macon has for the women in his life are evident in his daily interactions with them. And much like women in an abusive relationship, they have come to not only expect it, but as Morrison writes, "The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days" (11). Not only is this an abusive relationship, it is also marked by codependency; the women need Macon to define them and Macon needs them to dominate. Ruth and her daughters, Lena and First

Corinthians, do not thrive in Macon's home. They personify the patronym of their name; they are all "Dead" women in mind, body, and spirit.

Pilate's home is quite the opposite of Ruth's. Ruth's home is characterized as a male dominated space, while Pilate's is very female-centered. Ruth's home is one of violence, where abuse is inflicted upon her body; Pilate's is a home of safety and refuge. Ruth feels the security of Pilate's home; so does her son. Only Macon fears going to the house and the women who lived inside it. He was very strict with Milkman about never going there. But "Milkman is initially fascinated with this matriarchal household because of its difference from his patriarchal one. Here stories are told, food is tasty and plentiful, and none of the rigidity of his own home is present" (Byerman 202). When Macon goes against his own warnings and sneaks up to Pilate's house, he is entranced by what he sees. "Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight. Reba's soft profile, Hagar's hands moving, moving in her heavy hair, and Pilate" (29). Macon cannot take his eyes off the women. Pilate's home is full of life and music and he realizes that his is cold and barren. There is no question as to why Ruth's home becomes a site of violence. There is no spirituality, no sensuality, or connectedness to their ancestry. Trauma is enacted daily upon the women who live there and they must all venture outside of the house to receive healing.



## CHAPTER 5

### “THE MOST DESTRUCTIVE IDEAS”: THE TRAUMA OF SELF-HATE

Trauma is not only enacted upon the females because of male separation, but also because of lack of male value. What men come to value in women is their physical appearance. There is a stark contrast between the women in Macon's household compared to the women in Pilate's. Ruth and her daughters are light-skinned, while Pilate and Hagar are dark-skinned. Also, the women have dissimilar hair textures. While many instances of self-hate occur throughout the novel, the most traumatic occurs when Hagar sees Milkman with another woman. The woman, like her female cousins, is physically the opposite of Hagar. Issues of skin color and hair texture have plagued the African American community for centuries. In *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, Russell *et al* take up this very taboo subject matter, explaining, “In short, the ‘color complex’ is a psychological fixation about color and features that leads Blacks to discriminate against each other” (2). In Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she tackles color discrimination and self-hate in the life of Pecola Breedlove. Pecola is a young, Black girl who desires nothing more than to have blue eyes like her white doll. Pecola's eight-year-old friend, Claudia MacTeer, who despises blond haired, blue-eyed dolls and is repulsed by Shirley Temple, narrates the story. While Claudia is unrelenting in her hatred to the extent that she destroys her doll, Pecola is enraptured by images of whiteness. She is always eating Mary Jane (the picture of the little white girl on the candy wrapper resembles Shirley Temple) and she repeatedly asks Claudia if she may drink milk from her Shirley Temple cup. Abdellatif Khayati writes,

“Toni Morrison singles out the figure of Shirley Temple as a dominant icon of this white, consumer culture, and examines the psychic devastation to which Pecola is subjected as she imagines herself miraculously transformed into a Shirley Temple with blue eyes” (par.7). Drinking milk from the cup also signifies her desire to not only possess whiteness, but to consume it, as if by ingesting it she might become white. In “Tracking ‘the Look’ in the Novels of Toni Morrison” Ed Guerrero discusses the text asserting, “*The Bluest Eye* [. . .] holds as its central concern a critique of Western beauty and its special destructiveness when imposed upon people of color in general and women of color in particular. Morrison has these women in mind when she asserts in the novel that the idea of physical beauty is one of ‘probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought’” (28). Internalizing these ideas of beauty ultimately works to damage the self-esteem and self-identity of Black women. This destructive idea of physical beauty overtakes Pecola. She wants nothing more than to be loved and if she possessed blue eyes she believed love would inevitably follow.

In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar deals with many similar false assumptions concerning beauty and is psychologically damaged by them. After Milkman has dumped her she sees him in a bar with another woman. Detailing Hagar’s murderous rage, the narrator acknowledges,

The thank you cut her to the quick, but it was not the reason she ran scurrying into cupboards looking for weapons. That had been accomplished by the sight of Milkman’s arms around the shoulders of a girl whose silky copper-colored hair cascaded over the sleeve of his coat [. . .] and Hagar saw her gray eyes, the fist that had been just sitting in her chest since Christmas released its forefinger like the blade of a skinning knife. (126-7)

At first sight Hagar thinks the woman is one of his sisters because of her light complexion and hair. But, upon realizing that this woman is not one of his sisters, she

loses control. The woman emphasizes the European standards of beauty; Hagar possesses African features like Pilate. Hagar's jealousy is fueled by feelings of inadequacy and self-hate. She does not fit the type of woman that Milkman should be with. Russell states, "A Black man is aware that the way others judge him often depends on the attractiveness of the woman he is escorting. For the dark-skinned Black man, having a beautiful light-skinned woman at his side instantly communicates to others that he has 'made it'" (109). It is mentioned earlier in the novel that Milkman does not take Hagar around town with him. Couched in the explanation of shame for dating his cousin, his reluctance to be seen with her might also have to do with color discrimination.

According to Russell, "The politics of hair parallels the politics of skin color. Among Black women, straight hair and European hairstyles not only have been considered more feminine but have sent a message about one's standing in the social hierarchy" (82). The hair textures of the two women are also contrasted. While the woman has "silky, copper colored hair," Hagar's is described as being "heavy." It is not weightless or silky. By describing it as heavy Morrison is acknowledging that it is thick and possibly not chemically straightened. The fact that she is braiding her hair may, in fact, symbolize her connection to her African roots. The significance of braiding hair in the African American community is highlighted in Noliwe Rooks' "Wearing Your Race Wrong." Rooks uses an excerpt from Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* to further her argument:

I missed this when I was sold away from home...The way the womens in the Quarters used to would braid hair. Mothers would braid children heads—girl and boy—until they went into the field or for as long as they had them. This was one way we told who they peoples was, by home they hair was combed...Child learn a lot of things setting between some grown person's legs, listening at grown peoples speak over they heads. This is where I learned to listen, right there between

mammy's thighs, where I first learnt to speak, from listening at grown peoples talk. (286)

According to Rooks "braiding comes to symbolize closeness, comfort, and community..." (287). There are many occasions in the novel in which the women at Pilate's home are in the process of doing their own or each others hair. While they adhere to the more traditional African ways of doing hair, many women venture to beauty salons to have their hair processed with chemicals, or straightened with heat. The narrator alerts, "Beauty shops always had curtains or shades up. Barbershops didn't. The women didn't want anybody on the street to be able to see them getting their hair done. They were ashamed" (62). Morrison does not go into further detail about why these women are ashamed, but we can assume that shame comes from the psychological trauma of needing to have their hair altered because they do not naturally possess the European type of hair. The women are ashamed of the procedure they must go through in order to transform their hair, transform them even, in order to conform to an acceptable standard of beauty. Only then when they are considered decent can they come from behind the curtain. Men must not be allowed to witness this transformation. They can only see and appreciate the results. Morrison notes that men are not victim to this type of trauma. Barbershops are not hidden behind veils. The value of the men in the novel is not based on their appearance. They are valued for property, in the case of Macon and Milkman; for strength, in the case of Guitar; and for their ties to the community, in the case of Macon's father.

The process of "fixing" the hair is restricted behind veils, but the act of freeing one's hair, or letting it down, is symbolic of freedom. When First Corinthians finally experiences love and spends the night with Porter, she returns home with her hair down.

Dropping her off down the street from her house, he questions, “Hadn’t you better fix your hair?” (202). The narrator qualifies his question revealing, “He thought she looked beautiful like that, girlish, but he didn’t want her excuse to her parents to sound ridiculous. She shook her head. She wouldn’t have collected her hair into a ball at the nape of her neck now for anything in the world” (202). Wearing her hair down as a liberating act is reminiscent of Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* once she is free from her oppressive relationship with Joe Starks. In detailing this moment of freedom Hurston’s narrator states, “She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there” (87). She burns all of her scarves on the night of Starks’ funeral. Not having to “fix” one’s hair to conform to an accepted standard of beauty is an act of female liberation and self-actualization. For always desiring, but falling short of this standard is traumatizing to the female psyche. In a society that values women based on their appearance, not living up to the ideal is traumatic. The effects are seen in Hagar’s case. She does not experience the liberation of accepting her hair. It is only by “fixing” it that she thinks she can win Milkman back. While Hagar cannot remove herself from agony she feels because of Milkman’s preference for lighter complexioned women with long, silky hair, she remains nonetheless addicted to him and what she thinks he provides her. Her addiction is only tested. As Schaef asserts, “Even when they know the relationship is destructive, they will cling to it” (79). Hagar clings to the hope that she can have Milkman again even though he has caused her pain. She refuses to acknowledge that he has used her for sex. And she becomes intent on killing him only after reasoning with herself that if she cannot have him, no one else can.

To address Hagar's addiction to Milkman we must return to a time before the relationship was formed. On a visit to Pilate's house Milkman and Guitar sit watching the women make wine. When discussing Reba's winning of groceries in a contest Hagar alleges that they would have starved to death had she not. Pilate declares that no one would let her starve, but Hagar contends, "Some of my days were hungry ones" (48). Reba is hurt by this new information and affirms that they have always gotten her anything she has ever wanted. "Reba, she don't mean food," Pilate responds (49). The narrator does not say what it is that Hagar has hungered for, only that realization creeps over Reba's face. The silence by these women in response to Hagar's alleged emptiness apparently stems from something that they cannot give her. After a few minutes they begin to sing, "O Sugarman don't you leave me here [ . . . ] Sugarman done fly away"(49). Later in the novel we learn that the song is about Milkman's great great grandfather Solomon who flew back to Africa and left his family behind. It is possible that Hagar mourns for her missing and unknown father. When Milkman ends the relationship she experiences severe trauma possibly due to the loss of a constant male figure in her life. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison answers a question concerning Hagar's death by explaining,

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 men which she does not put to good use. Hagar has even less because of the absence of any relationships with men in her life. She is weaker. (qtd. in Appiah 401)

The sorrow she feels at this loss is identical to the mourning of Solomon's wife, Ryna. When Milkman travels to Virginia in search of gold he learns of his family history, which includes the story of Ryna. Milkman learns of Ryna and Solomon from his distant

relative Susan Byrd. It is a part of local folklore that once Solomon flew off and left Ryna she yelled and screamed for days. The ravine near where it happened is named Ryna's Gulch because when the wind blows across it her cries can still be heard. Susan tells Milkman, "They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something" (323). Hagar is a descendant of Ryna; she too has become that "kind of woman." Almost as if Susan has prophesied it Hagar's addiction to Milkman has begun to hamper her own personal survival. Possibly better classified as an obsession at this point, rather than an addiction Kasl explains,

An obsession occupies the mind and is often experienced as a painful intrusion that can't be shut off at will. It feels like an inescapable presence, another person in your head. It takes you out of the present, out of control, sometimes for months or even years. One woman described an obsession about a woman she was attracted to as 'a knife in my head I couldn't shake off. It was with me every minute. I started to feel physically sick, I couldn't eat, and I prayed it would go away. (67)

While the woman that Kasl quotes had a knife in her head, Hagar's knife was lodged within her chest and once a month she would dislodge it by going after Milkman. In her final attempt at his life, Milkman remains motionless in Guitar's bed as she stands over him with a knife. As she is poised to kill, Milkman wills her death instead. With the knife raised high above her head Hagar becomes paralyzed. When Milkman opens his eyes and gets up he cruelly admonishes, "If you keep your hands just that way and then bring them down straight, straight and fast, you can drive that knife right smack in your cunt. Why don't you do that? Then all your problems will be over" (130). But Hagar's problem does not reside in a part of the body, which can easily be chopped off. Her problem is internal; it is mental. "An obsession may signal that you are not being honest with yourself.

Obsessive thinking is often the difference between what we *know* to be true and what we *want* to be true. If you want to get over an obsession, you may need to look within yourself” (Kasl 67). But what would Hagar find from introspection? Possibly what has already been established, that she may be desirous of a paternal closeness or evidence of her low self-esteem. When Guitar finds her still frozen in his room he has pity on her and takes her home. On the drive to Pilate’s home he confides,

You think because he doesn’t love you that you are worthless. You think because he doesn’t want you anymore that he is right—that his judgment and opinion of you are correct. If he throws you out, then you are garbage. You think he belongs to you because you want to belong to him. Hagar, don’t. It’s a bad word, ‘belong.’ Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn’t be like that. (306)

Hagar’s worth is tied to Milkman’s desire for her. Without his love she feels worthless. Hagar remains in a catatonic state for many days. It is not until Pilate puts a mirror in front of her that Hagar snaps out of it. “Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn’t want me. I look terrible” (308). She bathes, gets her hair washed, her clothes ironed and goes off on a shopping spree. She also makes a hair appointment. On her way home it begins to rain and she is left soaked. She returns home with nothing to show for her effort. Hagar gives her stilted testimony in the arms of her grandmother. “Why don’t he like my hair?” (315). Her speech is fragmented, consumed with minute pieces of memory that have traumatized her. She cries about the woman’s silky, penny-colored hair, her lemon-colored skin, gray-blue eyes and thin nose (315-16).

If, as Morrison asserts, racism is trauma then intraracial prejudice is overly traumatic to the psyche. The wound that Hagar possesses is inflicted upon many African American women. bell hooks discusses these types of wounds and offers an avenue towards healing. hooks points to teaching texts by Black female authors as a way to



become more aware of the collective suffering of contemporary Black women.

Recounting their testimonies hooks explains,

When black female students would come to my office after reading these novels and confess the truth of their lives—that they were terrorized psychologically by low self-esteem; that they were the victims of rape, incest, and domestic violence; that they lived in fear of being unmasked as inferiors of their white peers; that stress was making their hair fall out; that every other month one of them was attempting suicide; that they were anorexic, bulimic, or drug addicted—I was shocked. (12)

In response to this trauma hooks establishes a support group, Sisters of the Yam, with the hope that “it would be a space where black women could name their pain and find ways of healing” (13). By naming the pain, or testifying to the trauma women may be able to recover. However, Hagar cannot. She is on the verge of death and cannot be pulled back. In Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, hooks discusses the suicide attempt of Velma in the opening of the novel as a moment of identification for some of her students. hooks observes, “*The Salt Eaters* begins with a question, asked by the elder black woman healer. She says to Velma, who has tried to kill herself and is barely alive, ‘Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?’ Only an affirmative response makes healing possible” (13-14). Without Milkman, Hagar would have undoubtedly answered in the negative. Schaef reports, “People die from relationship addiction. [. . .] Addictive relationships can be fatal, physically, mentally, and spiritually. They just seem to grind a person down” (81). Hagar’s addiction has taken its toll on her and the healing arms of Pilate are not enough to save her. And although Pilate has fought to love Hagar back by running her fingers through Hagar’s hair, she remains in a traumatized state with her testimony flowing out in pieces. Pilate can only respond with the words, “Hush. Hush. Hush, girl, hush” (316). Hagar’s testimony is silenced only in death. Why is Hagar not saved by Pilate’s love, why is her testimony not healing for her? As Vickroy relates, “If a

survivor is encouraged to narrate his or her experience and emotionally relive it in a safe context with an empathetic listener [. . .] this ‘can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory’ and can lead to relief (22). Pilate, while sympathetic, does not truly listen to Hagar’s testimony. She quiets her. In doing so, Pilate denies the truth behind Hagar’s words. While Pilate only means to comfort Hagar, the refusal to let her speak only negates her experience of trauma. Hagar is smothered by Pilate’s maternal drive to hurry away the pain.

Pilate’s trauma is experienced with the realization that she cannot rescue Hagar. There is no more appropriate space for her to give her personal testimony than at Hagar’s funeral. Pilate begins her testimony with only one word, “mercy,” then turns it into a question, “Mercy?” But, “It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out—the one word held so long it became a sentence—and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: ‘I hear you’” (317). Pilate and Reba sing their testimony, Reba in the back of the church and Pilate looking down upon Hagar’s lifeless body. Turning toward the congregation she mouths the words “My baby girl,” speaking the words to each person. Then, “Suddenly, like an elephant who has just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength, Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, ‘And she was loved!’” (319). Pilate takes on the form of a powerful, male-identified animal. In her powerful exclamation Pilate is critiquing a patriarchal society that does not value females. Hagar was valued and loved in her female-centered home. Pilate is justified in her anger at “the little men”

who would strip her of her sole possession, her grandchild, because they do not see the value in her. But she does not direct her anger at Milkman for causing Hagar's pain and death. While the novel may serve as a critique of patriarchy, the men in the novel are never directly indicted for the abuse they inflict upon their female victims. So, it comes as a shock that Morrison's novel would come under such scrutiny for being anti-male.

## CHAPTER 6 RACIAL INFIDELITY?

Toni Morrison, as well as many other Black female authors, has been denigrated for writing novels that do not conform to a stringent code of black love. These writers are condemned for airing their dirty laundry. Authors such as Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Terry McMillan have been criticized for as Lerone Bennett Jr. describes, “creating a new literature based on the premise that Black America is a vast emotionless wasteland of hustlin’ men and maimed women,” which ultimately, functions to construct a history of falsified relations between Black men and women (duCille 443). However, those who would condemn these writers for creating female-centered narratives, which allow their female protagonists to give voice to their pain, are attempting to silence these traumatized women once more. Critics cannot and should not view these texts as an indictment of all Black men. Rather they should see them as a “forum for exploring the oppression, insanities, sorrows, joys, and triumphs of women’s lives and [as a transformation of] those experiences into art” (duCille 456).

In “Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical ‘I,’” Ann duCille attempts to discuss the issue of gender essentialism by focusing on the “phallus as principle signifier and on man as principle referent” (445). In doing so, she teases out the distinction between what could be considered phallogentric and gynocentric “truths.” Her essay functions as a tool to foreground the ideas of black love that are brought up in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* in that the trauma experienced by Ruth, Hagar, and Ryna are due to loss of love. By focusing on the love of men as the root cause of female

oppression, duCille offers a passage from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as evidence of support. Janie's grandmother tells her, 'Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on [. . .] Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night" (449). Janie's grandmother makes this plight specific to Black women. In doing so she characterizes Black women as the only victims of an irresistible sexual need. In *Song of Solomon* Ruth and Hagar do everything possible to hang on to an oppressive love. But duCille goes on to claim that it is not only love that keeps Black women hung up, but also "dat penis—the domain of dominating power" (449).

We see duCille's theory being played out in Milkman's thoughts of the attempts Hagar makes at his life. He concedes that he was never afraid of her, actually, he was rather pleased with himself delighting in the fact that his sexual prowess could drive a woman crazy, "he had the power to drive a woman out of her mind, to destroy her, and not because she hated him, or because he had done some unforgivable thing to her, but because he had fucked her and she was driven wild by the absence of *his magnificent joint*" (emphasis added 301).

The Black male sex organ has historically been under scrutiny. Interrogating the trauma surrounding Black male sexuality does not fall within the boundaries of this paper, it does; however, become significant to discuss why Morrison seems to privilege the Black male penis within the text by allowing its removal to be so detrimental to female survival. It may not necessarily be the penis that is privileged, but rather what it signifies—power. Michael Vannoy Adams writes, "Psychically, however, rather than physically (or materially), the penis is poetic—at least when it functions symbolically as

the phallus” (162). “The subject, Lacan argues, can only assume its identity through the adoption of a sexed identity with reference to the phallus, for the phallus is the privileged signifier” (Segal 85). The penis becomes the privileged signifier for Black males because, especially in Milkman’s case, it allows for spectacle, fascination, and power. Milkman believes he can assert masculinity and/or power by invoking the phallus. bell hooks describes this as a “shift of emphasis on patriarchal status (determined by one’s capacity to assert power over others in a number of spheres based on maleness) to a phallogocentric model, where what the male does with his penis becomes a greater and certainly more accessible way to assert masculine status” (94). Milkman accepts his position of power not only in his relationship with Hagar, but to all the women in his life (with the exception of Pilate). As his sister Lena calls him on it scornfully remarking,

Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped 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. [. . .] Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives? I’ll tell you where. From that hog’s gut that hangs down between your legs. [. . .] You are a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man. I hope your little hog’s gut stands you in good stead, and that you take good care of it, because you don’t have anything else. (215-16)

Lena indicts the notion that would lower her status in the world based on what she lacks. She verbally castrates Milkman with her speech, an act that spurs him on to his journey of self-discovery.

Freudian theorists would undoubtedly allege that Ruth and Hagar both suffer from ‘penis envy,’ desiring from Macon and Milkman what neither of them possess. But we must push beyond this narrowly conceived theory. As Hillman explains, “The Freudian error lies not so much in the importance given to sexuality; more grave is the delusion

that sexuality is actual sexuality only, that the phallus is always only penis” (qtd. in Adams 162). The question then becomes, do Ruth and Hagar experience trauma because they are denied the sexual pleasure provided by the penis, or what the penis signifies? If trauma lays not so much in the denial of sexual fulfillment, but rather in the inequality of power in the relationships, then Hagar and Ruth desire a fundamentally feminist goal, equality. Hagar and Ruth are powerless in their relationships with Milkman and Macon. However, Morrison has been very open concerning her interest in and criticism of relationships. In an interview given by Christina Davis Morrison acknowledges, “I’m interested also in the relationships of black men and black women and the axes on which those relationships frequently turn, and how they complement each other, fulfill one another or hurt one another and are made whole or prevented from wholeness by things that they have incorporated into their psyche” (qtd. in Appiah 419). It is with an understanding of this statement that I contend that the root cause of their trauma resides in sexual denial.

Interestingly, in the beginning of their relationship it is Hagar who wields power over Milkman. It is Milkman who chases and Hagar who denies. “She babied him, ignored him, teased him—did anything she felt like, and he was grateful just to see her do anything or be any way” (92). In this way Hagar controls the situation fully. It is not until they commit to a sexual relationship that her power is transferred to Milkman. Much like the nourishment he has taken from his mother, Milkman takes from Hagar; he grows strong while she weakens, mentally and physically. It is not a coincidence that these things occur simultaneously. As Trudier Harris asserts, “The pattern is set in a way that Milkman thrives in direct proportion to Hagar’s demise. As he learns more about his

relationship to her and the rest of his family, her physical essence decreases in value. For each stage on the journey that brings enlightenment to Milkman, that enlightenment comes directly from Hagar's lifeline" (112). Milkman indeed lives up to the meaning of his name.



## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Having consulted many texts on the nature of trauma, the one thing that remains constant is the significance of telling, or narrating the trauma as a way of surviving it. Judith Greenberg quotes a question asked by Caruth in her essay “The Echo of Trauma and the Trauma of Echo” asking, “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories [trauma narratives]...is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (325). Ruth has survived the trauma inflicted upon her body by Macon, yet living with the impact of it continues to haunt her. Ruth still lives without touch, without care and affection from Macon. Hagar, however, has not survived her traumatic experience. The “crisis of life” proves to be too great for her to withstand. While both women endure two distinct damaging experiences, the initial trauma is the same for both of them. They both suffer the rupture of a love relationship, which sets the tone for the remainder of their lives.

Realizing that neither is content to live deprived of the love and affection provided by their significant others, I return to the epigraph of the novel and my earlier question contemplating the omission of the women. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison makes a critique on a patriarchal society, which devalues women. While some would characterize the text as a novel about the loss of fathers, I contend that it is rather about the effect the loss has on the psyche of the women left behind. Certainly, men in the novel experience the

trauma of paternal loss, but they have inherited a coping ability that the women have not. The very masculinized idea of the quest works to ultimately traumatize the women who are left grounded. As Milkman realizes at the conclusion of the novel, men have inherited the ability to fly. Men lose and in return they leave. The women, however, remain stationary. They remain tied to the land, tied to their children. They are left to pass on the stories, sing the songs, and mourn the men who have left them. In the end Hagar is left dead, and Ruth is shattered. Morrison does not offer her readers a happy ending to this story of love and loss of love. Rather she leaves us with one more woman being left. Before Pilate dies she tells Milkman to “Watch Reba for me,” but Milkman does not (336). Whether he dies at the hands of Guitar or flies off like Solomon, Reba will be left alone. Having always depended on Pilate to care for her, one can only wonder what her testimony will be.

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