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Directeur de Publication: M. Pierre KRAMOKO, Maitre de Conférences

Adresse postale: 01 BP V 18 Bouaké 01

Téléphone: (225) 01782284/(225) 01018143

Courriel: pkramokoub.edu@gmail.com

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TABLE OF CONTENTS/ TABLE DES MATIÈRES

1. Kouadio Germain N'GUESSAN, **GENDER HIERARCHY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY: THE IMPOSED MASK**.....1 - 19
2. Goh Théodore TRA BI, **HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NARRATIVE THEORIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**.....20 - 37
3. Ezoulé Miézan Isaac KANGAH, **BRITISH POLITICAL SCENE IN JONATHAN COE'S *THE CLOSED CIRCLE***.....38 - 56
4. Gabrielle KEITA, **UNCOMPLETED ASPECT MARKING FROM STANDARD ENGLISH TO NIGERIAN PIDGIN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**.....57 - 68
5. Constant Ané KONÉ, **REMEMBERING SLAVERY MEMORY IN GAYL JONES' *CORREGIDORA***.....69 - 88
6. Germain ASSAMOI, **MODALITY IN SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE, BETWEEN RADICAL AND EPISTEMIC**.....89 - 105
7. Koffi Eugène N'GUESSAN, **BRIDGING THE VALLEY OF NIHILISM IN AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES***.....106 - 121
8. Souleymane TUO, **SLAVE REBELLION IN ANDRE PHILIPPUS BRINK'S *AN INSTANT IN THE WIND***.....122 - 139
9. Dolourou SORO, **A MARXIST READING OF ERNEST GAINES' *A LESSON BEFORE DYING***.....140 - 156

10. Tié Emmanuel TOH BI, **POÉTIQUE TRAGIQUE ET TRAGÉDIE, POUR L'ESQUISSE D'UNE POÉTIQUE DU TRAGIQUE DANS LA POÉSIE NÉGRO-AFRICAINE; UNE ILLUSTRATION DU MICROCOSME IVOIRIEN DANS LA *MÈRE ROUGE* DE CEDRIC MARSHALL KISSY.....**157 - 178
11. Paul KOUABENAN, **THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF ART: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE, A MAN OF THE PEOPLE AND ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*.....**178 - 192
12. Renais Ulrich KACOU, **COLONIALISM AND RACISM IN TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *THE BOOK OF NOT*.....**193 - 203
13. Adiele Kilanko ZANNOU, **THE AMERICAN DREAM IN LANGSTON HUGHES' SELECTED POEMS.....**204 - 226
14. Jean Jacques Gnahoua SABLÉ, **LA LITTERATURE COMME UN EXAMEN DE MEMOIRE, D'OUBLI ET DE RECONCILIATION.....**227 - 235
15. Aliou Badara KANDJI, **VIOLENCE, INCEST AND DELAYED DECODING IN THE SCOTTISH BALLAD, "EDWARD, EDWARD" (CHILD 13)...**236 - 244
16. Pierre KRAMOKO, **THE HOMELESS HOUSEHOLD: A REFLECTION ON THE FAMILY IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND *SONG OF SOLOMON*.....**245 - 259
17. Désiré Yssa KOFFI, **THE VOICE IN THE PERIPHERY: BLACK CULTURE IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*.....**260 - 272

18. Minata KONÉ, **THE NGURARIO OR MARRIAGE IN FICTION AND REAL LIFE**.....273 - 285

19. Daouda COULIBALY, **THE DRAMATIZATION OF THE FEMALE BODY: DISCOURSES OF RESISTANCE AND POWER IN OF EVE ENSLER'S THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES**.....286 - 298

THE HOMELESS HOUSEHOLD: A REFLECTION ON THE FAMILY IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND *SONG OF SOLOMON*

Dr Pierre KRAMOKO
Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké
pierre_uwb@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Black American families are intertwined by the vestige of slavery that emasculated the black slave, subsequently giving the black woman the position of family leader. Concentrating on Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, this article proposes a re-evaluation of black feminism. The objective is to analyze such families in which the fathering woman's role is one of the hegemonic. But it appears that despite her sense of sacrifice, she fails to play two roles, that of the mother and the one of the father who is absent. The emotional instability of most characters in the two fictions reads, therefore, as a result of the unstable family circle that presents the image of an open circle. That is how, the discussion suggests moving from the community of women to the construction of black American families where the mother and the father constitute the two pillars of their stability.

Keywords: Motherhood – Household – Slavery – Woman-headed family – Open circle – Unrest – Community of women

Mots clés: Maternité – Ménage – Esclavage – Famille dirigée par la femme – Cercle ouvert – Malaise – Communauté de femmes

Résumé

Les familles noires américaines sont étroitement liées aux vestiges de l'esclavage, une institution qui a émasculé l'esclave noir, et qui a donné à la femme noire la position de chef de famille. A travers une lecture de deux romans de Toni Morrison, *Sula* et *Song of Salomon*, cet article propose une réévaluation du black feminism. L'objectif est de faire une analyse de ces familles où la femme tient un rôle dominant. Mais, malgré son sens du sacrifice, il apparaît qu'elle ne parvient pas à jouer deux rôles, celui de la mère et celui du père qui est absent. L'instabilité émotionnelle de la plupart des personnages dans les deux romans se définit, en conséquence, comme le résultat de l'instabilité de la famille qui présente l'image d'un cercle ouvert. C'est en cela que cet article suggère de passer de la communauté des femmes à la construction de familles noires américaines où la mère et le père constituent les deux piliers de leur stabilité.

Introduction

When I think of home, I think of a place
Where there's love overflowing.
I wish I was home, I wish I was back there
With the things I been knowing. . . .

Charlie Smalls, "Home"¹

When he quotes the African-American composer and blues singer in the introduction of his book, the African-American critic Valerie Sweeney Prince explains that the home, for African Americans migrating from the agrarian South to the industrialized North, meant "justice, opportunity, and liberty." (*Burnin' Down the House* 2005: 1) In the twentieth century that quest found its expression in blues, and the black community's sentiment paralleled the search of a home of love, justice, and equality. In American history, the home designated a place, that is, the Northern area of the US. Similarly, Toni Morrison's fiction in general, and in particular, her novels *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), envisage the family as another form of place where that experience of love evoked by the singer is made. In the two novels, women are central to the building of the home, giving sense to the family.

Through a description of the black family in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* this discussion aims to show how the family circle fails to be for the characters a home of happiness, as if the women's efforts are annihilated by their own vision of their role as well as childbearing. The reflection will draw upon Derrida's theory of deconstruction applied to the feminist thought in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. To use Arthur Bradley's expression in his analysis of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, the article defines Deconstruction in terms of "re-evaluation" (*Derrida's Of Grammatology* 2008: 82). In similar ways, in its re-evaluation of black feminism, which resonates as womanism, or motherhood in Toni Morrison's works, the paper investigates black families in order to state the causes of their being flawed in the two narratives.

Andrea O'Reilly rightly mentions that motherhood is a central theme in Toni Morrison's fiction (*Toni Morrison and Motherhood* 2004: 1). If that is true of the African American female writer's novels, it is also noticeable how the majority of her characters, mothers, husbands, daughters, and sons evolve in family circles each marked by complicated relationships mostly between mothers and children, and between women and their husbands. Consequently, with reference to slavery, this article begins with the exploration of the black home as one built on motherhood. The second phase of the argumentation defines the family

¹ These lyrics by the African American composer and blues singer can be found in Valerie Sweeney Prince's book *Burnin' Down the House* (p. 1)

through the image of open circle that suggests the inability of the woman-led family to keep the cohesion and understanding among its members. In a sort of overall examination of the two narratives, the last part suggests how to move from a community of women to the construction of black families.

1. A Home Built on Motherhood, a Vestige of Slavery

Characteristic of Toni Morrison's fiction is the picturing of African-American communities with families headed by women. This section is based on the recognition of the rule and role of such strong female characters in her narratives. But it also shows that if the social structure of these communities play out the specificities of black feminism, it details the vestige of an institution in which the black male slave was a mere manpower for production and reproduction, whereas the female slave was attributed the role to bear and raise children. The section offers the opportunity to scrutinize the nature of families built on the power of women, as illustrated in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*.

After slavery time, black feminism has kept that structure in black communities where the man is castrated while the woman gains in power. Andrea O'Reilly quotes Toni Morrison who proudly defines motherline as a social structure promoting the empowerment of the black woman who "could build a house and have some children ... they are both ship and safe harbor at the same time" (Andrea O'Reilly, op. cit., 41). In this way, motherline is essential in the construction of the black community, because, according to O'Reilly, the lineage through the woman "represents the ancestral memory, traditional values of African American culture."(Op. cit. 12) But to what extent can the woman build a house? And what is the nature of a family in which the second pillar of the structure is absent, or plays a minor role? These are some of the questions that can be raised in the study of Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, the third one.

The prologue of *Sula* chronicles the story of Bottom, an area where Black people live in the town of Medallion. The reference to Bottom, a gift of an ancient slaveholder to his ex-slave who wanted to have a piece of land in the neighborhood of his former master shows the vestige of slavery in *Sula*. Equally, in *Song of Solomon* the recollection of slavery occurs through two characters: first, it is reported that an African named Solomon flew to Africa in search of liberty for himself and his family as well; the second reference to slavery is evoked in chapter one of the novel when the North Carolina insurance agent, Mr. Smith, wants to repeat the myth of the flying African when he decides to fly.

The evocation of slavery time shows the extent to which the characters are affected by the bondage legacy left by their slave parents. If the two fictions are not slave narratives, the impacts of slavery on the trajectory of most of the characters are nonetheless effective. One of such effects is visible through the role and rule of the woman in the seeming families in which the protagonists grow and evolve. The organization of their social lives is built on women, either mothers or aunts. After the prologue about Shadrack, a World War I veteran who has decided to celebrate death every year on January 3, *Sula* begins with the description of one of the major motifs in Toni Morrison's fiction, that is, the family. The first is the one led by Cecile, Helene's grandmother (*Sula* 17). She is the one who arranges the marriage between her grand-daughter and her nephew Wiley Wright.

This episode of the marriage arranged by Cecile shows her influence on her grand-daughter and her nephew as well. The latter is said to have taken a decision "under the pressure of both women" (*Sula* 17), hence the authoritative attitude of Cecile. Wiley Wright is a cook on a ship, a job connected with the image of the kitchen. But it can be argued that at home, he keeps on working, in a symbolical way, in his aunt's kitchen. His wife, in turn, reigns over the house in the course of his long absence due to his job on the ship. His being "peripheral both in the actual home and psychologically" causes him to hold a secondary role in the running of his home (Harold Bloom 1999: 80).

The other matriarch-run family in the novel is the Peaces. In this family, Eva Peace has become the sole leader when she has been abandoned by her husband BoyBoy who, in the narrator's terms, "took off" after five years of marriage (*Sula* 32). The image of flying used to qualify the action of Eva's husband sounds like an irresponsible attitude characteristic of many men who prove unable to run their respective families. But, it can be argued that flying and leaving the family have been carved in the men's psyche since slavery time when they were 'emasculated' by their masters. Though they gain freedom, the black husbands still give the impression of being trapped in a spiral of fatality in ways that it becomes difficult for them to be bound to wives and children. The unbound BoyBoy has left his wife Eva Peace and three children, Hannah, Eva also called Pear, and Ralph or Plum, with only "\$ 1.25, five eggs, three beets." (*Sula* 32)

It is worth nothing that the name BoyBoy makes allusion to the image attributed to all black slaves who, for the white master, stay an immature person, no matter his age. Illustratively, in the fiction, when he comes and visit, Eva's husband is unable to explain why he has abandoned his family. He calls on his family when his son Plum is three years old. The husband's description by the narrator confirms such an attitude of irresponsibility: "He

opened the door and stood smiling, a picture of prosperity and good will.”(*Sula* 35) This depiction shows how BoyBoy feels unconcerned, and how he totally ignores the difficulties his wife meets to take care of the children he has left with no financial support. In his conversation with his wife, he does not even “ask to see the children” (*Sula* 36); in other words, he is no more the leader of the family. Significantly, Eva’s smile to BoyBoy gives evidence for her being convinced that her husband cannot play the role of a family leader, but herself (*Sula* 36). Moreover, her smile eloquently tells the man that she has taken control of the house, and she is not willing to let an emasculated man play a role she perfectly accomplishes. In the novel, in effect, she is the “creator and sovereign of this enormous house” abandoned by her husband (*Sula* 30). As a creator, she organizes every activity in the home and provides for her family members. Her sovereignty plays out when she exerts a strict control over her own children, but also the kids she has adopted. Under her governance there are also friends and a “constant stream of borders” – all of whom show great respect to her – a sentiment that often extends to fear in such a way that no one can talk of her disability (*Sula* 30). Therefore, she is both the mother and the father. Eva Peace becomes the fathering woman in a family that needs stability, protection, the feeling of membership, and love.

In *Song of Solomon*, the family led by Macon Dead, Jr. with some manly authority seems to give the characteristic of such ideal family. However, it comes to be counterbalanced by his sister’s household. As a result, when the man-led family decreases in power on the children, the woman-led family grows in importance as the story progresses. Macon Dead’s family offers the image of a stability-looking unit whose members enjoy happiness. Along their trip to Honoré beach community, the family gives the image of unity, with all in the car (*Song of Solomon* 31). The feeling of protection is guaranteed by the father, Macon Dead, Jr. who drives the car. He does not want anybody to dispute that position he holds in the family, that is, the protector. That is why, when his wife Ruth tries to recommend him to drive carefully, after she has noticed that he always takes “the wrong turn,” he firmly replies if she wants to drive, too(*Song of Solomon* 33). The answer provided by the woman is significant: “You know I don’t drive.” (*Loc. cit*)

The scope of this answer goes beyond the simple fact of having the ability to drive a car. The conversation between Macon Dead, Jr., the man, and Ruth Dead, the woman, is profoundly that of a man who attaches importance to his role of family leader. For him, it is important to stay the husband and the father who exercises control over the lives of his children and wife. Accordingly, Ruth’s reply means to assure her husband that she cannot, and has no intention to, perturb this order. Qualifying the family in the fiction, Valerie Smith

says that the “Deads exemplify the patriarchal, nuclear family” built on the traditional pattern that offers stability (*New Essays on Song of Solomon* 1995: 11).

Yet, that stability and the feeling of security family members should enjoy are undermined from the inside because Macon Dead’s children are afraid of him. The kids’ fear adds to the husband’s “hatred of his wife” (*Song of Solomon* 10). The atmosphere of tension in the Dead family is eloquently reported by the narrator:

Under the frozen heat of his [Macon Dead’s] glance they [his daughters] tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs.... In his absence his daughters bent their necks over blood-red squares of velvet and waited eagerly for any hint of him, and his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it. (*Song of Solomon* 10)

Macon Dead, Jr. is said to have a sentiment of disappointment of his daughters whom, he believes, are unable to do any activities that will ultimately make them enter the canon of social achievement as designed by the white society. His posture of “nouveau riche” which is supposed to form the black bourgeoisie results in distance. Physical and emotional, that distance endlessly grows between himself and the rest of his family members. Though he has no intention to fly back to Africa, the feeling of abandonment of his wife and children is no less effective. So far the two spouses have sexual intercourses deprived of love (*Song of Solomon* 16), the distance between them grows, and the crumbling of the Dead family turns inevitable. That is how Macon Dead orders Ruth to abort (*Song of Solomon* 125), and suspects his wife of having had incestuous relations with her father (*Song of Solomon* 73).

For the daughters, the ‘flying’ of the father takes the form of lack of love, assistance, and protection they should be given in a family. For the son, too, the father has flown when the narrator reports on the latter’s sentiments of “disgust” and “uneasiness” to his son (*Song of Solomon* 15). The distance between them reaches its climatic point as the son takes side for his mother to the detriment of his father during a violent quarrel (*Song of Solomon* 67). The father feels humiliated by his own son who dares strike him back in order to defend his mother.

Unlike the families in *Sula* where the fathering woman’s rule is one of the hegemonic, the man-headed family of the main protagonist in *Song of Solomon* consecrates terror and misunderstanding, hence the crisis it will undergo as the story develops. That crisis takes

greater and greater proportions in such a way that Macon Dead loses his authority over his family members. While the household gradually falls apart, the one led by Pilate grows in strength and influence, despite the poor living condition she lives in. That is how the center of decision changes from Macon Dead's household to the home run by Pilate who now poses as a dominant matriarch. Eventually, the woman becomes, at least, the spiritual leader of the whole Dead family, including her own household and her brother's. Thus, the reality about the family in *Sula* with female-headed household is recreated to the extent that Macon Dead is dethroned whereas his sister takes the power. Milkman who was born under her influence; his trip to Virginia in search of the roots and cultural identity of the Dead family is undertaken with the help of his aunt. Macon Dead himself cannot resist the power of his sister whose house has become a place of pilgrimage, as compared to his own "empty house" (*Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* 46).

Thus, Black families in the two novels *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* share the same feature, that of being characterized by the dominant positions of women who act as mothers transmitting the values of the black community to the children they raise. Those woman-headed families which originate from slavery – a period that the narrator evokes in the two fictions – mark the rupture between marriage and childbearing. As a result, the family that is often qualified as a circle presents the image of a circle of unrest. Thus, if the circle relates to the family to express its functions of protection, confidence, and understanding among its members, it can be qualified as an 'open circle' when such functions do not work.

2. The Open Circle

Most female characters in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* are all the stronger as they play the double role of mothers and fathers in their respective families, when their men have flown. In these families, therefore, the rupture between marriage and childbearing becomes a common feature. Though such households differ from those in which children are raised by either a gay or lesbian parent – to restate Fiona Tasker's observation – the children in the narratives remarkably develop "closer relationships with their mothers"(quoted by Linda C. McClain 2013: 182). With the allusion to the sociological definition of the family as "a societal unit" (Geoffrey S. Nathan 2000:1), this section interrogates if the woman can successfully be at home "the ship" and "the safe harbor," according to an expression by Toni Morrison who details the role of black women (Andrea O'Reilly 20).

In the sociological understanding of the family, the house is an important place where each person plays his or her specific role (Geoffrey S. Nathan 9). The family and the house are associated in such a way that the existence of the former cannot be imaged without the evocation of the latter. The two are parallel, because talking of one equates with referring to the other. For Kalenda C. Eaton who comments on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the fiction can be interpreted as "a cautionary novel that warns of the impending destruction of the community." (*Womanism* 2008: 12). Although that is not mentioned by the critic, it also implies and includes the possible destruction of the family.

The episode where the character of Milkman, in *Song of Solomon*, beats his father materializes the destruction of the Dead family. The son believes, indeed, that his mother is not provided enough protection. His act almost resembles a parricide that consists in playing the role of the husband who fails to protect his wife. Importantly enough, the mother's need of love has led her to substitute the husband for the son whom she has nursed till he is six years old. Milkman who lives in a destructed family plays an essential role in the course of his transformation into a mature and less egocentric man upon completion of his trip. Thus, after his aunt Pilate, he becomes the depository of the history of his lineage, and also that of the community in the area. But because he fails to reconstruct the Dead family in the private sphere, the public role he successfully assumes cannot make him a complete character. Indeed, what is the state of a community in which families are weak?

It is noted that the central theme of *Song of Solomon* rests on the search of identity. Purposely, the main protagonist's imperfections mentioned within the family sphere lose in importance with regard to that noble objective. In this way, the character's threatening his father may not be given the gravity it should deserve in the family context. The question, indeed, is to know whether Milkman could carry his threat, or if the intention is to dissuade his father from beating his wife, the protagonist's mother. The answer to the question is not clearly provided by the narrator. But the reader knows about the "information" the father decides to give to his son, for the latter to act with intelligence, in Macon Dead's terms, if he has to raise his fist at his own father next time (*Song of Solomon* 70).

As he decides to tell his son the reason why he has beaten the boy's mother, one can understand how the man wishes to make the boy side with him. The father feels humiliated, but he is proud at having evidence of his son's physical strength. His creeping along the wall when assaulted by Milkman marks in a simultaneous way the crisis within the family, the end of the father's power, and also the existence of two 'heads' in the family. Definitely, if one considers that the word circle is often associated with the family to designate cohesion and

protection inside that social unit, the Deads led by Macon Dead presents the image of an open circle. That shows how the family is flawed due to the failure of the leader to guarantee the cohesion and arouse in his family members the feeling of protection.

One can agree with Göran Therborn in his study of the family when he describes the family as “an enclosure in the open battlefields of sex and power.”(*Between Sex and Power Family* 2004: 2). Viewed in terms of institution, the family is traditionally built on two pillars, namely the mother and the father, or the father and the mother; the order depends on the degree of role played by each of the two spouses. It is this kind of gendered-role “power” that Therborn perceives in his analysis. But far from being characteristic of an ideology formulated and imposed by a dominant social class, the tradition is embedded within the natural: the family comes into existence with the association of the two principles, the masculine and the feminine that are embodied by a man and a woman. In the Dead family, the father fails to play a key role in the raising of his children, because he wrongly believes that the values of materialistic wealth will make them share his vision. The mother cannot play a significant part, to the extent that she is emotionally weak and is afraid of her husband. Thus, the image of an open circle corresponds with the Dead family, due to the absence of power of the mother and the father. That results in an overall malaise in the family circle.

For reasons different from those characterizing the family in *Song of Solomon*, *Sula* also chronicles on many occasions a state of unrest in families. This malaise is very often the result of the wife’s abandonment. *Sula*’s grandmother Eva Peace makes that experience after five years of marriage. For Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos contributing an article titled “*Sula* and the Primacy of Woman-to-Woman Bonds,” “Eva develops an antipathy for the co-equal masculine” (*Toni Morrison’s Sula* 1999: 81). Such a description of this strong female character explains why she smiles when her ex-husband calls on her. Her smile can be construed as an expression revealing her mental strength despite her state of abandoned housewife. But it is that kind of smile that disarms the man and keeps him away from the woman’s sphere of power, that is, the home and the family.

If Eva Peace does not want a man to dispute the power in the household, the question, still, is to know the effects of her solitary exercise of power. Rita A. Bergenholtz is right enough to question the personality of Eva when she insists on how one should “respond to her abandonment of her children, her loss of a limb, and her torching of Plum” (in *Toni Morrison’s Sula* 7). The critic hesitates between praising the woman’s courage and condemning her actions. When a woman is so much dedicated to many people in the family, while her financial capacities are low, and when she devotes her energies as a mother to her

children, the possibility for her to become psychologically weak exists. Her enthusiasm and pride can possibly decrease. That is how her actions come to be ones of an ambivalent character.

She torches her son Plum, but she is ready to throw herself out of the window to rescue her daughter Hannah (*Sula* 76). To understand why she burns her son, it is necessary to remind that Plum whom she loves fails to respond to her expectations because he has become an alcoholic and a drug addict. In Eva's mind, therefore, Plum embodies the incompetent black man unable to love a woman and have with her a stable family. In her state of desperation, she loses her mental strength and her love is substituted for hatred for the black man, and her son alike. The image of her husband is projected into Plum. However, when she courageously throws herself out the window in order to rescue Hannah, it the action of a woman for another woman. In her heart of hearts it is not simply a daughter she does not wish to lose; it is also a woman she must rescue.

Thus, it is clear that Eva Peace's emotional state does not enable her to stay what Toni Morrison terms as "the ship" and "the safe harbor" of her family. Her ambivalence along the story is the result of her being exhausted following great efforts, with no man in her life to bring the psychological comfort she needs. That is also how her family comes to be dislocated in the end. Eva herself is sent to an old people's home, and Sula is alone in a deathbed in the house where Eva has displayed her power. The desolate condition of the Peace family illustrates the malaise felt by the people, a malaise to which Eva has tried to provide a remedy through her actions as a mother and a host for the borders. But the fate of Eva and Sula shows that the family stays an open circle, that is, an incomplete social unit that fails to protect the members and assure their happiness.

Like Eva, Nel is abandoned by her husband Jude Greene. Unlike the woman, the man embodies the black husband who is absent both physically – because of his demanding job at the Hotel Medallion and his numerous extramarital affairs – and emotionally, because "he wasn't really aiming to get married" and "it wasn't nearly enough to support a wife" (*Sula* 80 – 81). Thus Nel is abandoned the very first day she meets Jude whose interest is not to found a family, but increase the number of girls attracted by his handsomeness. Nel's and Jude's couple exemplifies the family circle in which the functions of affection or love, socialization, economic and emotional support cannot be successfully accomplished. That is verified with the case of Betty, another abandoned woman. She is certainly so desperate that she becomes "an indifferent mother" to her own son Teapot (*Sula* 113).

Conclusively, many families in *Sula* present the image of social institutions that fail to carry out their functions for the blossoming of the individual. The absence of the father in these families affects the people who, as a consequence, feel a state of unrest. In detailing households built on a “community of women” – according to Houston Baker’s phrase (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature 1984:55*), *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* suggest the construction of black families upon patterns different from those connected with their slavery legacy.

3. From a Community of Women to the Construction of Black Families

Restating a popular phrase of the French philosopher Andre Malraux, Charles Blend proposes the following translation: “a human life is worth nothing, but nothing is worth a human life” (*Andre Malraux: Tragic Humanist 1963: 54*). If it is applied to the family in Toni Morrison’s fiction, the paraphrased formulation can read as follows: ‘the father is worth nothing, but nothing is worth the father.’ In his interpretation of the black female writer’s second novel, Karen Carmean asserts that “Morrison often uses community as an active character in her work.”(*Toni Morrison’s Sula 150*) In *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* as well, the community that Carmean refers to is that of women. Departing from observations about the imperfections marking many households, when these families are led by only one pillar, namely the woman or the mother, this section aims to emphasize the necessity of the father and/or the husband for the stability of the household.

The devastating state of the characters who live in dislocated families, the novels lead to put the following question: ‘Who’s who in the fatherless family?’ Eva Peace, the abandoned woman, has heroically taken care of a populated household that includes Ralph also known as Plum, Hannah, Pearl before she gets married and settle in Flint, Michigan, Hannah’s daughter Sula, Tar Baby, a white alcoholic who lives in the family, the three Deweys, and a lot of borders. All these people count on the woman for what they need. For a critic like Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, Eva is against marriage, because “to marry would simply empower a man to take from her the home and territory over which she must reign” (in *Toni Morrison’s Sula 81*).

That may be true concerning the character’s intention, but the reality is that she fails to maintain the stability of her family. An evidence of that failure occurs when she burns her son Plum, certainly because she is desperate. Her daughter Hannah can hardly explain why she pretends to have been constantly dedicated to her children she loves, while she is

paradoxically able to torch one of them. That paradox concerning the character of Eva is evoked by the critic Rita Bergenholtz through the following interrogation: “Should we admire her stoutheartedness and her ability to survive, or should we be horrified by her actions?”(quoted from *Toni Morrison’s Sula* 7) Undoubtedly, Bergenholtz is confused at the protagonist, so is Hannah, Eva’s daughter. The girl also questions her mother’s love when she puts: “Mamma, did you ever love us?”(*Sula* 67) Though the mother replies that she loves them, the question itself unveils a crisis of confidence between the mother and the daughter.

It is clear that Eva does not stay strong enough to maintain her position of leader in the family. She has smiled at her husband’s irresponsibility and immaturity since he fails to be both a stable spouse and a father for his children. But she also abandons her son whom she burns, and later her granddaughter Sula. Indeed, because she perceives her husband through the girl, her hatred for the former comes up when she sees the latter. That is what the narrator reports in the following extract: “Eva looked at Sula pretty much the same way she had looked at BoyBoy that time when he returned after he’d left her without a dime or a prospect of one.” (*Sula* 91) Thus, the family of which Eva intends to be the sovereign does not resist the effect of time, because the task appears beyond her capacities. That is quite the same with another female character named Nel.

When Nel is abandoned by her husband Jude, she renews her friendship with Sula, certainly not because she forgives the latter who has taken her man, but because she believes that being with another woman will enable her to overcome the pain of her husband’s departure. In effect, the two friends experience the dislocation of their respective families, and the rebirth of their relationships becomes a necessity for the sake of psychological comfort. But here again, that community of the two women lasts for a while. The reason is that Nel does not get the answer to her question about why her best friend from adolescence to adulthood, has had sex with her husband: “How come you did it, Sula?” In reply, there is only “silence,” (*Sula* 144) and Sula in turn asks her friend why she does not forget about her adultery if they are really friends. Definitely, the two women cannot agree with each other.

The end of their friendship is best conveyed in Nel’s words: “Goodbye, Sula. I don’t reckon I’ll be back.”(*Sula* 146) If the friendship between Nel and Sula exemplifies the community of women in Toni Morrison’s literary productions, the end of that friendship is an evidence of the instability of that community. From that experience, it can be inferred that more than the community, it is a stable family that the characters need. The novel “warns” not so much “of the impending destruction of the community” (*Literature, and the Transformation of the Black Community* 12), as the probable ruin of the family circle. Most

characters in the novel, indeed, go through psychological devastation because of the instability of their families.

Eva poses as an arrogant woman who develops some sort of excessive self-reliance. She leads a community of women principally composed of her two daughters, and her granddaughter. But the state of the community she runs causes Melvin Dixon to ask the woman can successfully cut herself off from alliances or partnerships with men (*Toni Morrison's Sula* 90). Visibly, despite her efforts, she cannot make the Peace family a home of love. Suffice it to mention the episode where Sula's mother is burnt. For the eye-witnesses, the little girl is so paralyzed that she stays with no reaction. But for Eva, Sula's grandmother, she has watched her mother burn without the least attempt to rescue her, just because she has been "interested" in the burning of Hannah (*Sula* 78).

Like Eva in *Sula*, Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* is a strong woman dedicated to her family. Although she lives in her own house away from her brother's, her influence covers the entire Dead family. She actively participates in Milkman's birth, and is the one to whom Ruth Foster Dead goes in case the latter has trouble in her house. Unlike Eva, she develops an extraordinary physical and mental force to provide all the members of the family with the assistance and comfort they need. She takes care of her daughter Reba, her granddaughter Hagar, to whom one can add Macon Jr.'s wife and two daughters who find comfort in the woman's house. That is how Pilate's community of women in the fiction comes into being.

Pilate is of great importance in Ruth's life, but Milkman's mother stays unsatisfied despite the psychological comfort she finds at her sister-in-law's place. For want of a stable family she needs through her marriage with Macon Jr., she resorts to some strange practice by lying on her father's grave (*Song of Solomon* 123). Milkman certainly finds her action indecent, but it conveys the desperate state of his mother. It also proves the woman's need of a stable family, one that can provide love and happiness. When she confesses that she is "not a strange woman," but "a small one" (*Song of Solomon* 124), she confirms that need of a family space where she feels protected in order to compensate her weakness, or 'smallness'.

Like Ruth, Hagar who is described as Pilate's granddaughter seeks love. Beyond her "passion" that often turns into "affliction" (*Song of Solomon* 127), one can also perceive her need of a stable love from a man. She certainly wishes to build a family with Milkman, the man she loves. Hagar, too, cannot be satisfied with what her grandmother gives her at home. Interestingly enough, her grandmother who is said to have been helpful to the extent that she has used magic for Macon Jr. to have sex with his wife Ruth, proves incapable of arousing

Milkman's love. In other words, Pilate's power is limited, and, more importantly, the community she leads cannot replace a family her granddaughter requires.

Conclusion

Some women in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* are described as developing extraordinary psychological strength. These women lead families in which they hold a position that eclipses the power of their men whose sole interest is to 'fly', that is, to abandon the family because of the difficulty for them to meet the social and economic challenges of present-day United States. But these female characters fail, in the long term, to provide people in their households with full satisfaction. The desperate state of many of the protagonists tends to show that the women alone cannot constitute families for the individual's needs.

The ruin of the family in the two novels leads to a re-evaluation of the feminist discourse about the possibility for the woman to cut herself off the role of the man in her life. The emotional and physical absence of the husband is tragic for the children. But this absence cannot be fulfilled by the woman, despite her mental force. Thus, the two fictions eloquently demonstrate that the black community begins at home, and the family is the place where the individual's full development is carried out. In describing the father or the man as airy, the novels certainly deals with his irresponsibility, but also reveals how it is essential for him to become again the other pillar on which the family should rest.

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