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BRIDING THE PLAYMATE: BILL COSEY AS A SYMBOL OF BLACK PATRIARCHY'S SOCIAL FAILURE IN TONI MORRISON'S *LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

African-American entrepreneur, Bill Cosey, Morrison depicts that how despite gaining economic success he failed to provide social, emotional or even economic support to his house-holds. It is the economic success of Bill Cosey that becomes the reason for the disintegration and hatred among the Cosey family members. At the inception of the novel Morrison gives an account of animosity between the two elderly women who hate each other, however, live together in a big decayed Cosey house. But as the story progresses the spirit of what we called as 'failed patriarchy' has been unveiled. It has been revealed that the rival women, Heed and Christine, were once childhood friends, playmates; Bill Cosey, to whom both are associated during his life and even after his death. Drawing a picture of patriarchal dominance, Morrison, demonstrates how the two little girls are being catapulted into the world of animosity without even making them to realize what damage has been done to their innocence and happiness.

KEY WORDS: *African-American male, Animosity, playmates, failed patriarchy,*

INTRODUCTION

Love is the story of love though in its patriarchally perverted forms, and the novel seems to question this very traditional patriarchy and its connected violence, and of course its consequences on both women as well as men. Love as a tool in the hands of Morrison is being presented as an action rather than a feeling. Like her first novel *The Bluest Eyes*, that ends with a treatise that, "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly,

violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe" (*The Bluest Eyes* 206). Morrison in *Love* too argues that love is not better than the lover and love of a 'free man' is never safe. Bill Cosey as a patriarch proves failure and as a free man becomes unsafe to his surrounding world i.e. women. Even after his death his presence is being felt everywhere in the novel and that ghostly presence too brings ruination to all, whosoever felt his presence.

A.J. Wardi explains: “Bill Cosey, the former owner of Cosey’s Hotel and Resort, was a wealthy and powerful man whose act of love and violence, generosity and cruelty, structure the novel” (204-205). This paper aims at demonstrating that Morrison views Black as failed patriarchy.

BILL COSEY AND COSEY WOMEN

As the novel opens, we find only two members of Cosey family, Heed and Christine, living in decayed Cosey house. Bill Cosey has been dead some twenty five years ago. As the narrative unfolds, we meet Bill Cosey, a rich and successful Black hotelier whose passion and confidence has set an example among African-Americans. No doubt his material success and impressive personality attracts the surrounding people but his sexual relations with many women depict him as immoral person. It was the death of Bill Cosey’s adorable wife, Julia and then the untimely death of his son, Billy Boy that results into the increased number of such sexual relations with many more women. He tried to find refuge into the arms of many women and excessive boating trips. However, such habits restrain him from developing a mutual understanding and good relation to his widowed daughter-in-law, May, wife of Billy Boy, and to his grand-daughter, Christine, an orphan. This depicts the social as well as familial failure of Bill Cosey, who neither met the demands of his family relations as father-in-law or as a grandfather.

Despite being the sole social and emotional support to both, May and Christine, Bill Cosey provides them none. At this crucial juncture adding to the miseries of his family, Bill Cosey, announced his marriage to his grand-daughter’s playmate, Heed, and thus drained whatever peace and security was there in the lives of Cosey women. The narrator L put it as, “When we were just two females, things went along fine. It was when the girls got in the picture—Christine and Heed—that things began to fray. Oh, I know the ‘reasons’ given: cannery smell, civil rights, integration... It was marrying Heed that laid the brickwork for ruination” (104).

Although it seems that Bill Cosey planned to marry Heed “all because Mr. Cosey wanted children” and to bring happiness in his own life as well as within the Cosey family (139). However, the marriage turned out a failure and brings misery and conflict, not only in Cosey family but to the personal life of Bill Cosey too. It is how, despite being a successful entrepreneur he failed to be a successful man both at social as well as at familial level. The family trauma and in turn his personal trauma made Mr. Cosey a figure of complete failure. Thus, the marriage of a fifty-two year old Bill Cosey to his grand-daughter’s playmate, an eleven year old Heed, proved a turning point to Cosey’s. The marriage brings rivalry and hatred among the members

of Cosey house, or more appropriately among Cosey women.

A MARRIED MENACE

Through this marriage, Morrison presents the picture of failed patriarchy among Black men both in upper prosperous class of Bill Cosey as well as in the lower class of Heed’s father. Infatuated with eleven year old Heed, Bill Cosey acts irresponsibly and announced his marriage to her. As rightly described by Jean Wyatt: “The Cinderella economics of marital mobility gives way to a different economic model of marriage: slavery... Cosey bought the pleasure of a slave owner: absolute power over another human being, the license to subject her to his sexual whims” (210). Though both, Bill Cosey as well as Heed’s father failed in delivering their duties, however, Mr. Cosey’s fault seems more grave as he defies the social norms of marriage by choosing an eleven year child as his bride.

Morrison dehumanizes Bill Cosey as a pedophile, one who molests an eleven year old child in the name of marriage. The recollection of memories by Heed while bathing signifies that how binding an eleven year old child into an untimely knot of marriage not only ruins her childhood but deprived her of real sexual pleasure that was otherwise due to her, however, at proper time. What Heed recalls about her first night of marriage was nothing but actually a heinous picture of child abuse. “Undressing. No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees, and opened her legs to the surf” (77-78).

Though unwelcomed by May, Christine and Heed’s friendship seemed inseparable if marriage would not have spoiled everything. It was Mr. Cosey’s first meet to Heed when he “touches his chin, and then—casually, still smiling—her nipple, or rather the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes” (191), that puts seed to the upcoming disaster. “Bill Cosey abuses a poor, illiterate eleven year old child, sold for money by her family, and deprives her of the only love she has ever had – her friendship with Christine” (Palladino 16).

Thus, Mr. Cosey’s anomalous and improper choice put the two inseparable friends into an inseparable rivalry. The two friends stand in front of each other as enemies and thus turned the Cosey family into a battlefield. Already annoyed by her daughter’s friendship to Heed, May feels devastated as the marriage seems improper to her, not only in terms of age but class difference too. The girl whom May could not bear as friend of her daughter is now her mother-in-law, the new boss: “a bottlefly let in through the door, already buzzing at the food table and, if it settled

on Christine, bound to smear her with the garbage it was born in” (136). Concerned about her daughter’s future, she too adds Christine as her accomplice in the game of hatred and thereby sealed the fate of girls’ friendship for forever.

THE LOST CHILDHOOD AND CHILDHOOD FRIEND

Henceforth, both the girls suffer irreparably; but Christine’s loss was grave. Having previously lost her father and almost her mother too, as May put her on the mercy of L, she lost fatherly affection from her grandfather and most precious loving friendship to Heed. The first jolt that Christine bears is when her mother asked her to leave her bedroom for a room on another floor as there were “things she shouldn’t see or hear or know about” (95). Though Christine “fought to reclaim her bedroom,” but of no use (96). Instead, she “was sent away, far away, from the things not to be seen, heard or know about” (96). When Christine is more or less thrown out, she is first sent to school, the Maple Valley. She blames Heed for being expelled and feels alienated and abandoned to such an extent that ends her up in brothel.

Apparently, it seems May, Christine and Heed bear the responsibility of their rivalry and in turn to their miseries. It is though L’s narrative that hints about the presence of a hidden monster of dominant, but failed, patriarchy. “Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked” (4-5). In the story of Cosey women, the monster was Bill Cosey whose failed patriarchy ruined their life. Despite enjoying economic success Bill Cosey made Christine ‘outdoors’ as Cholly Breedlove though plagued by poverty made Pecola in *The Bluest Eyes*.

After being exiled from Cosey house Christine was drawn by her loneliness, she leads to a string of unhealthy relationships with men—in all of which men being dominant expels or more suitably exploits her. Responsible to whatever wrong was done to Christine, Morrison dehumanizes Mr. Cosey as a failed figure of father unable to protect his granddaughter. Bill Cosey, the only man known to Christine, was a sneaker and as such infidelity of men seems normal to her. It is thus when Christine’s first husband, Ernie Holder, cheats her she easily enters into the second relationship and that too with a married man. Being abandoned by her own family, Christine made relationships to men not out of love but out of her need of belonging or to be wanted. That is how Morrison presents Bill Cosey as an emblem of failure who put Christine, her granddaughter, into the patriarchal world of his own carbon copy in which she consequently loses her self-worth. Christine’s relationship with Dr. Rio, a true copy of Bill Cosey, who changes women as

he changes things in his life, was her last attempt to establish herself away from Cosey house. Uprooted from Dr. Rio’s apartment, she finds herself again in Manila whorehouse.

FAILED PATRIARCHY

The theme of failed patriarchy, either as failed father, lover or in other capacity, is extended by including Junior, who consequently becomes a prominent character in the novel. Junior’s abusive past and homelessness led her to apply for the job of personal assistant to old Mrs. Cosey (Heed). Junior being the last of many women who have been charmed by Bill Cosey’s impressive personality, through a portrait and feels homely protection when enters into the otherwise deserted and dreary Cosey house on Monarch Street. “Sleep came down so fast it was only in dreaming that she felt the peculiar new thing: protected” (29). To her Bill Cosey in the portrait represents the figure of father that she never had: “As soon as she saw the stranger’s portrait she knew she was home” (60). However, unknown and unaware to father-daughter relationship, Junior develops an unconventional though imaginary sexual relation to dead Mr. Cosey

This is the way Morrison relates women to Bill Cosey through sexuality which indirectly depicts the sexually abusive nature of Mr. Cosey. Such character of Mr. Cosey has also been hinted by Sandler on his first encounter to Junior by commenting that, “Bill Cosey would have done more. Invited her in to warm herself, offered to drive her where she wanted to go... Cosey would have succeeded, too; he almost always did” (40). This is how Morrison showed that in a dominant, though failed patriarchal world woman has been reduced to mere sexual object, and even their relation to each other rests on the presence or absence of this patriarchy. In the novel Morrison symbolizes or relates this much failed patriarchy to the darkness in the lives of its affected women. As observed by Junior: “It seemed to her that each woman lived in a spotlight separated—or connected—by the darkness between them” (25). The darkness symbolizes Bill Cosey who was responsible to whatever differences or connections were there between Christine and Heed in the novel.

Coming from the Settlement, Junior has no concept of real house. Like most of the males in the novel her father too represents the symbol of irresponsibility who abandoned Junior soon after her birth at the mercy of her weak mother and wicked “truckful of uncles” (58). Except her name, Junior’s father has given her nothing, neither love nor protection, for both she craves throughout her life. Devoid of any fatherly affection Junior’s life becomes more miserable at the hands of wicked teenaged uncles. Her mother, “Vivian could not protect her from Vosh or the uncles” (58). Left with no other option

Junior flee from the Settlement and finds herself in Correctional. After completing her term in Correctional with good remarks she expects “a job offer would be discuss.” However, again with an encounter to the failed patriarchy in the form of an attempted assault by the Administrator she met with another misfortune of her life. Though “Killing the Administrator was not on her mind-stopping him was” (116), but during the struggle the Administrator fell from one story and died, and authorities put the blame on Junior and she again finds herself on roads. Thus, troubled by the failed patriarchy of her father, uncles and then the Administrator, Junior reached Cosey family.

Even twenty-five years after Mr. Cosey’s death, his dominant presence still decides the action of women in Cosey house. In the words of Wardi: “Indeed death has done very little to stop the Cosey women from having intimate relation with this powerful patriarch. He overshadows their lives, their home, and their relationship with one another” (Wardi 205). “The acrimony of Heed and Christine’s endless fight escalated after Bill’s death when his ambiguous will passed on his estate to his ‘sweet Cosey child’. As a consequence, both women claimed to be his legitimate heir on the ground of this vague and questionable document” (Palladino 2). However, the fight reaches its culmination in the final meeting of Christine and Heed at the hotel: “The eyes of each are enslaved by other’s. Opening pangs of guilt, rage, fatigue, despair are replaced by hatred so pure, so solemn, it feels beautiful, almost holy” (177). On Heed’s fatal fall, Christine unexpectedly gathers her in her arms; the incident opens the gates of childhood memories. Consequently it made both, Heed and Christine, to realize Bill Cosey’s betrayal and the damage that has been done to the lives of both by his failed patriarchy. Jean Wyatt put it as: “It is the forced patriarch and premature sexuality that put them off course, that made their attention swerve from the thing that mattered (their friendship) to the only thing that seemed to matter—what the man wanted. But now, recentered in their friendship, reflecting on the past from the regained perspective of the pre-heterosexual world, they can see the enormity of Bill Cosey’s actions and name them, accurately, as a crime—as a theft of childhood, and more: ‘He took all my childhood away from me, girl,’ Heed says” (Wyatt 198).

The will that reads ‘sweet Cosey child’ as heir to Cosey estate is, however, a tempered one scribbled down by ‘L’ and thus through this she successfully keeps the two girls or friends intact though as rivals. In the actual will of Mr. Cosey, he has left almost everything to Celestial, his prostitute beloved. On getting this will ‘L’ feels betrayed on part of Bill Cosey and thus she not only changes the will but kills the man and thus relieves all women, including herself,

out from his spell. Though, not openly and elaborately discussed, the love affair of Mr. Cosey and the prostitute, Celestial, too depicts the failure on part of Mr. Cosey. Despite getting an expected response in the form of Celestial’s love, Mr. Cosey choose Heed as his bride and not her and thus denied to her what she otherwise deserves. Also making Celestial as nominee in the will, Mr. Cosey deprived all other women including Heed, his wife as well as ‘L’ of what they deserve. Thus, during his life and even after his death, Mr. Cosey represents the symbol of irresponsibility and failure.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Bill Cosey is directly responsible for the ordeal of the Cosey women, violating the social norms of marriage, Bill Cosey turns everything topsy-turvy in Cosey household. An eleven-year-old friend, Heed, is turned into grandmother of Christin; it has adverse effects on both. Morrison deliberately removes the dominance of Mr. Cosey’s failed patriarchy completely; physically disappearing him from the lives of Cosey women. Morrison connects Bill Cosey’s failure to his past via Cosey women. However, in the character of Christine and Junior we see how the absence of any responsible father-figure ruins them and consequently lose their moral and self- worth.

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