William Uhler Hensel Prize

Restricted Female Identities in a Man's World in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Katie Machen '15  
ENG462: Toni Morrison  
Fall 2014
In Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the story follows Milkman Dead, a young man on a quest to uncover his family history and identity. While the plotline focuses on his male perspective, the novel is constantly infused by the presence of different women, notably, his aunt Pilate, who helps lead him along his path, her daughter Reba, and her granddaughter Hagar. While readers see Milkman interact with these women throughout the novel, he interacts less often with other women who might be expected to be closer to him, like his mother, Ruth, and even less so with his older sisters, Magdalene (Lena) and First Corinthians. His distance from the women in his immediate family portrays the image of who those women really are to Milkman and what purpose they serve. Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians are characterized by their relationships to men as a wife, as sisters, and as daughters, and it is this relationship that dictates their place in the story and in their family. Their familial roles and overall voicelessness allow Macon to assert a type of bondage over them, and it is not until they express their voice that they can hope to break from that expected master narrative, but even having spoken, they are so greatly stuck in their expected roles that their words make little lasting difference.

The women of the Dead family are each very much defined by their place in the family setting; unlike Milkman’s character, instances in which we see a real perspective into the person of Ruth, Lena, or Corinthians are rare. We are instead given a sense of their character largely through their role in relation to the men in their family. The first of those roles is that of the daughter. Lena and Corinthians are not often present in the text as a whole, and their place is established early on undistinguished from each other merely through their father’s “disappointment” (Morrison 10). Indeed, even as children they accept this disappointment and “without the tension and drama he [ignites], they might not [know] what to do with themselves” (11). In regards to their father, Lena and Corinthians act in an almost masochistic manner,
hoping for Macon’s disappointment because it drives their sense of self-identity. He is the actor and they are passive beings, controlled by his judgment and his proclamation of their goodness or badness. Like slaves, they see him as a master impossible to please, but they retain devotion because of his place as their father. When he is not home, they “wait eagerly for any hint of him” and they see “the way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem [as] the single excitement of their days” (11). Because of Macon’s role as a father, his daughters inherently aim to please him, even if they their own distress and discomfort is at expense. Even as a grown woman, Corinthians uses her father as an excuse not to sleep with Porter, saying the problem is “‘only [her] father...the way he is’” (195). Corinthians uses this excuse even at 44 years old because at the base, despite her education and knowledge, she sees herself as Macon’s daughter. She uses her father as an excuse to hide her shame of Porter’s social status because she has the capacity to do so; although the claim is only partially true, Macon remains a commanding figure in her life, and if he wanted to take such a control on her life even later on, he would be able to do so.

If Lena and Corinthians are defined by their father and a devotion born in fear, Ruth is defined by a different type of devotion to her father, a devotion that outlasts her father’s death. When Macon seeks to marry Ruth, he is not attracted to her out of love, but rather out of the possibility of attaining an even higher status. From the start, Ruth is not her own person, but is the doctor’s daughter, whom Macon asks “the doctor’s permission” (23) to be with. As Lena and Corinthians serve Macon in a filial manner, Ruth belongs to her father in a similar manner; he is the owner and he makes the rules. Like Lena and Corinthians, Ruth delights in her devotion to her father from a young age, but her delight surpasses the thrill of her daughters in response to Macon’s fury. Rather, Ruth’s delight is the “ecstasy that always [seems] to be shining in [her] face when he [bends] to kiss her – an ecstasy that [feels] inappropriate to the occasion” (23). Dr.
Foster is aware of a level of eroticism in his relationship with his daughter that puts him at unease. While Macon seems to own Lena and Corinthians in a more conventional regard that hearkens to an idea of slavery, Ruth claims her father’s ownership over herself by her overwhelming and consistent affection. In just as potent a way she is a slave of her father, but she chooses her slavery to be such a way and therefore carries an agency that creates her identity. She allows herself to be a slave to her father because she sees him as a superhuman figure, and even after his death regards him the only person who “cared whether and cared how [she] lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did” (124). Ruth defines her self-identity in terms of her father in the belief that no one else can be trusted, that he holds the ultimate key to who she is.

As a wife, Ruth is the ultimate possession, chosen by Macon for her net worth to give himself a higher status. She is made an object and her identity is split between acting as her father’s daughter and as her husband’s wife. Her days revolve around Macon’s will, as she “[begins] her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and [ends] them wholly animated by it” (11), a product of his hatred. Macon uses his hatred to affirm Ruth’s lack of individual identity, saying, “You by yourself ain’t nobody. You your daddy’s daughter!” (67). If anything is surprising in this statement, it is that Macon does not claim total ownership over Ruth as he has before; his ownership of her goes only so far. Just as Macon acquires Ruth for her label as “doctor’s daughter,” he is unable to rid her of that label. In belonging to him, Macon must also acknowledge Ruth’s belonging to her father, a belonging that will always be a part of her. Since Macon is unable to remove that label, he extends his power further than hatred: in his control of his wife he rewrites her story, telling Milkman the secrets of her past from his own particular angle, which he deems “the whole truth” (70). In the most striking piece of this “whole truth,”
Macon tells his son how he finds Ruth “laying next to [her dead father]. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she [has] his fingers in her mouth” (73). In portraying his wife in such a light, Macon turns the “daddy’s daughter” into an accusation of engaging in acts of incestuous necrophilia. Milkman concludes that “you can’t do the past over” (76), but in repeating the past from his specific lens, Macon does do the past over. Unable to make his wife completely his own, he instead makes her past his own, solidifying his bondage over her.

Despite the viewpoint of a perpetual victimhood of women, Ruth takes agency, not only by her self-labeled “I certainly am my daddy’s daughter” (67), but in the legacy she gives her son. It is not until Milkman hears his father’s “whole truth” that he remembers a piece of his own truth: “My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk...and that is why they call me Milkman” (78). Although Ruth is without power to modify her own identity, she has the ability to shape her son’s, and she does so by binding him forever to herself in such a way that stays with him forever as his name, the crux of his identity. In this way, Ruth leaves a mark on the world, not by herself or her own identity, but by what she can leave on another. However, her mark is not seen as good, but rather as selfish and rooted in further hints of incest. A woman “long deprived of sex” (134), the conception and eventual birth of her son is “her single triumph” (133), an announcement to the world that she possesses fortitude and some type of power. The breastfeeding, then, comes less from a place of motherly attachment and more from a place of longing for the attention her husband will not provide, the touch she had received from her father, and the satisfaction of feeling wanted and carrying a sort of power over another. The act serves as a “secret [indulgence],” the “something else...to get from sunup to sundown: a balm, a gentle touch or nuzzling of some sort” (13). Her actions come from a place of desire, but as she
is unable to verbally express her needs and longing with her husband, they must remain secret. This scene of Ruth as a mother is one of the sole points that her character is made more complex, becoming more than simply a daughter and a wife, but a person with desires. She gives her son his identity just the way her identity is given to her, in a way that goes unquestioned and unchanged. She remains her father’s daughter, and her son remains Milkman. But despite the added complexity to Ruth’s character, her actions come from a place of dependence. She is only able to express this side of herself in her role as a mother, a role that depends on another human being to classify itself, and in this case, she depends yet again on a male character.

Such is the state of the black woman: she is to be defined by her place as a daughter, wife, and mother. Although Lena and Corinthians never marry or have children, they are viewed through the same lens as their mother, and Milkman “had never been able to really distinguish [his sisters] (or their roles) from his mother” (68). Milkman does not consider such roles as daughter, wife, or mother, because he does not see that Lena and Corinthians differ so greatly from his mother even though they are neither wives nor mothers. Milkman’s view of the women’s collective identity is rooted in what he sees of the women in his life, in how they clean the house, obey his father, and keep quiet. He does not see them as individuals, and is therefore “startled” to see “a look of hatred so fresh, so new” (68) after he has hit their father in defense of their mother. Because the women have no individual voices throughout, they become one and the same, weaving in and out of each other, not one of them making a distinct impact on Milkman. Their identities are constructed by the viewpoints of others, of men.

For the most part, Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians remain fairly silent for the length of the novel, confined to the roles they are given by Macon and Milkman. However, each has a scene in which her voice is finally spoken and her true identity is revealed. Corinthians remains by far the
most silent of the group and her “whole truth” remains unrevealed until she meets Porter. Despite her college education and studies in France, Corinthians is reduced to “two uniforms” she wears, “too elegant” (188) for a different job or for any suitor she met. Because Corinthians is overqualified, she does not get either job, and her identity is reduced to that of a maid. However, Corinthians shows her own sense of identity through shame she feels when courting Henry Porter, to whom she feels superior. She needs him to know that “there is a difference between a woman and a lady” (197), and she knows who she is due to her education. She knows of the significance of her education and invests her truest identity in her achievements, but as they are not recognized by the world or by the men in her life, they may as well not exist.

After having been branded by Macon’s “whole truth,” Ruth reveals her own truth to Milkman at the cemetery where her father is buried. Separated from her husband, she is given an opportunity to express herself from her point of view, a glimpse of Ruth outside the realm of the master narrative, the piece of “black women’s existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression” that make up “the ‘real world’” (Smith 1). She reclaims her own story, asserting to have “[kneeled] there in [her] slip at [her father’s] bedside and [kissed] his beautiful fingers” (126), remembering history differently from Macon, who “told [Milkman] only what was flattering to him” (124). Ruth comes closer than Corinthians to uncovering her personal identity because she uses her voice, but because she is only able to reclaim her identity at the site of her father’s grave, she is still bound to that devotion, and her personal identity, though verbally expressed, remains tied to a man and to her roles as daughter, wife, and mother.

Conversely, Lena’s expression of her voice comes closest to a clear reclamation. Lena does not receive an education, marry, or have children, but rather stays home and serves in the household of her father. Lena’s identity is perhaps the fuzziest in the first place, because without
the roles of wife, mother, or even educated student, she is left as a daughter and a sister, and she works her roles quietly until the final chapter in Part I, in which she rebukes Milkman. Because Lena does not carry as rigid an original identity as the other two women apart from her name, which is often repeated, "Magdalene called Lena" (31), the entrance of her voice is given special power as she puts Milkman in his place, saying, "Where do you get the right to decide our lives?" (215, author's emphasis). Lena criticizes Milkman's assumed ownership on his mother and sisters, implying that as Milkman stands up for their mother, he asserts his own power, which stems solely from the "hog's gut that hangs down between [his] legs" (215). Lena's attack on the patriarchy asserted by her father and brother gives her a voice, showing how her identity stretches beyond her place in the house as a daughter and servant. However, even though Lena's true voice manifests itself, it is not quite enough because it is not received: Milkman's sole response is to shrug off her "advice" and "[close] the door" (216). The emergence of Lena's voice comes closest to expressing her fuller identity, but this identity cannot be accepted in a household where the patriarchy continues to persist and where the standards put in place drive the society.

Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians face obstacles that prevent them from fully expressing their identities as women, and though the expression of their voices takes them further into a revelation of their true selves, those expressions are not enough. Their roles in the realm of the family are what prevail, because as they only have Macon and Milkman as their judges, they are forced to hold to the master narrative. While the emergence of their voices give them more of a stake in their personal identities, their root is grounded in Macon's ownership.
Works Cited

