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## Female Identity Through Self-actualization in Toni Morrison's Love

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the formation of female identity through self-actualization in Toni Morrison's *Love*, focusing on the psychological, social, and cultural entrapment of female characters under the patriarchal dominance of Bill Cosey. Using Freudian psychoanalysis—particularly the Oedipal complex and the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego—and Nancy Chodorow's feminist theory, the study analyzes how women such as Heed, Christine, and Junior were deprived of parental figures, which drove them into emotional dependency on Cosey as a patriarchal symbol. Their initial bond, rooted in solidarity and shared trauma, was fractured by power, status, and sexual politics. The novel critiques how patriarchy commodified women and disrupted female unity. Ultimately, the study reveals that although these women attempt to assert their identities, they remain psychologically entrapped until an act of symbolic revenge restores agency. The analysis highlights the enduring conflict between female solidarity and patriarchal control in the construction of identity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"The novel opens with the present-day musings of a nameless narrator—identified only by the initial 'L'—who guides us through some of the key events and unfoldings in the book" (Kiguwa, 2022). Toni Morrison expresses that the messages in *Love* are about the universal and timeless relevance of self-identity, self-esteem, soul-seeking, female bonding relationships, and human nature. In the novel, Bill Cosey is presented as a powerful and noble man, with each female character striving for self-determination. The women in Cosey's life—including May, Christine, Heed, and Junior—are portrayed as orbiting around him, much like worker bees surrounding a queen, forming emotional and economic dependence.

May, the daughter-in-law of Cosey and the widow of his only son, raises Christine, his granddaughter. Heed, his second wife, and Junior, Heed's assistant, are also pulled into this patriarchal structure. When Cosey briefly withdraws from public life to mourn his son, May and "L" manage the hotel, and May supports Christine's upbringing. Christine spends her childhood with Heed as a close friend. However, as the years pass, their friendship deteriorates, especially when Christine perceives that her grandfather favored Heed over her. Christine recalls:

"This was important. Her struggle with Heed was neither mindless nor wasted. She would never forget how she had fought for her, defied her mother to protect her, to give her clothes: dresses, shorts, a bathing suit, and dolls; to picnic alone on the beach. They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one's daydreams were the same as the other ones".

Heed does not receive love and care from her parents, and her life intertwines with Christine's through a deep yet fragile bond. As Søvting (2024) notes, "the lives of Heed and Christine are subtly intertwined; each is the other's antagonist but also her greatest love." While Christine strives to become a maternal figure for Heed, Erica Sanchez provides a contrasting image of female empowerment in *Crying in the Bathroom*, where a mother's consistent love fosters resilience: "her mother keeps feeding her, and everyone showers her with love and motivation" (Sherma, 2023). Christine, lacking such support herself, seeks to compensate by nurturing Heed.

Their bond dissolves traditional boundaries between self and other. Despite class differences, their closeness compensates for their alienated mother-daughter relationships. May is preoccupied with managing the hotel and pleasing her father-in-law, while Heed's mother struggles with poverty and emotional detachment. The absence of reliable maternal figures creates emotional voids that lead both girls to seek comfort in each other, forming a fragile yet powerful substitute family unit.

This paper investigates the formation of female identity and the fragmentation of female bonding in *Love*, using Freud's psychoanalytic theories—especially the Oedipus complex—and Nancy Chodorow's feminist lens on mother-daughter relations. The study emphasizes how parental absence, patriarchal exploitation, and class conflict influence the psychological development of Heed, Christine, and Junior. The purpose is to examine how Morrison critiques the entrapment of women in systems of power, inheritance, and sexual politics, and how these forces affect their attempts at self-actualization.

The novelty of this paper lies in its integration of psychoanalysis and feminist theory to highlight how Morrison's characters, though initially bonded through trauma and solidarity, are ultimately divided by patriarchal control. This analysis contributes to current literary criticism by framing *Love* not just as a narrative of interpersonal tension, but as a broader commentary on the institutional forces that obstruct female empowerment and unity.

## 2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, grounded in psychoanalytic literary criticism and feminist theory, to examine the construction of female identity and the dynamics of self-actualization in Toni Morrison's *Love* (Olesen, 2007; Frosh & Saville Young, 2017). The methodology involves a close reading of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and symbolic imagery, focusing on how psychological and sociocultural forces influence the inner lives and interpersonal relationships of the female characters.

The primary theoretical framework is derived from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, particularly his concepts of the Oedipus complex and the tripartite model of the id, ego, and superego. These ideas are employed to investigate the unconscious desires, emotional dependencies, and inner conflicts of the characters, especially about the absent father figure and the projection of paternal authority onto Bill Cosey.

To complement this, the study incorporates Nancy Chodorow's feminist psychoanalytic theory, which emphasizes the critical role of early bonding relationships, particularly between mothers and daughters, in shaping female identity. The absence or dysfunction of such relationships in *Love* is central to understanding the characters' psychological vulnerability and their reliance on patriarchal substitutes.

The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, and is not aimed at generalization but at deepening the understanding of the specific literary representations within the novel. Through this interpretive lens, the analysis considers how female bonding is portrayed, how it is disrupted, and how attempts at self-definition are undermined by patriarchal and racial ideologies embedded in both familial and societal structures.

This study also engages in intertextual analysis, drawing upon secondary sources including scholarly critiques, literary reviews, and feminist interpretations of *Love* and other Morrison works. These critical texts are used to contextualize Morrison's representation of Black womanhood and to position this analysis within the broader field of African-American feminist literary criticism.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that all the leading female characters—Heed, Christine, Junior, and May—are deprived of nurturing parental figures, which drives them to depend emotionally on Bill Cosey as a symbolic patriarch. Heed is sold by her impoverished parents to Cosey for two hundred dollars, while Christine's mother, May, is too occupied with hotel business and pleasing her father-in-law to provide maternal care. Junior's mother fails to protect her from abuse, forcing her to flee the Settlement. This shared abandonment binds the women to Cosey as the dominant father figure.

Their initial bonding relationships, especially between Heed and Christine, are marked by childhood solidarity. Christine recalls, "They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language... one's daydreams were the same as the other ones". However, this bond is destroyed when Cosey marries Heed, transforming friendship into rivalry. Christine confesses to Junior: "One day we built castle on the beach; the next day he sat her on his lap... the next day she was fucking my grandfather".

After Cosey's death, his ambiguous will, leaving his estate to his "Sweet Cosey Child," deepens the feud. As "L" narrates, their conflict becomes ritualistic: "Once—perhaps twice—a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled... never drawing blood, never apologizing...". Cosey's continued ghostly influence reinforces patriarchal dominance, sustaining division among women even in his absence.

The psychological effects are profound. Junior, for instance, seeks protection in her dreams, associating it with the portrait of Cosey, stating she felt “a peculiar new thing: protected”. The findings reveal that all these women are emotionally, socially, and sexually exploited by a single man who embodies the institution of patriarchy.

The results highlight Morrison's critique of patriarchal systems and their psychological grip on women. Through Freud's Oedipus complex and the psychoanalytic theory of repression and unconscious desire, *Love* illustrates how female characters unconsciously seek paternal figures to compensate for childhood neglect. Chodorow's feminist theory further explains that “when the triangular bonding relationship between mother, father, and daughter is dysfunctional, the psychological development of the girls will be incomplete”. Heed and Christine's fractured bond results from the absence of this essential relational dynamic.

As Elizabeth Abel notes, same-sex female friendship is “as important as a mother-daughter relationship for identity formation” (Abel, 1981). Yet, in *Love*, that potential for solidarity is sabotaged by Cosey's actions and the societal norms that reward division among women. May is also portrayed as someone who “wanted whatever he wanted,” silencing herself to please Cosey.

Katherine Fulton (2009, p. 6) emphasizes that these women “were largely deprived of a bonding relationship with their mothers,” reinforcing the idea that patriarchy thrives on the disintegration of female emotional support systems. L, too, internalizes patriarchal obedience: “So, they open their legs rather than their hearts”, representing a society where women are taught to offer pleasure, not resistance.

The novel also engages with racialized patriarchy. As McCarthy (2004) states, *Love* unfolds against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, exposing how race and gender intersect. Morrison pairs dark-skinned, lower-class Heed with light-skinned, upper-class Christine, challenging intraracial color bias. Morrison constructs “alternative notions of subjectivity and belonging that defy stereotypical images of Black men.” Yet in *Love*, even Black men like Cosey perpetuate gendered oppression.

Each woman attempts to construct identity—Heed through marriage, Junior through fantasy, May through sacrifice—but all are betrayed. Cosey's love for Celestial, his hidden lover, nullifies Heed's position. Christine returns for the inheritance but finds nothing. May loses her mind after years of devotion. The only subversive act of liberation comes through L, who kills Cosey with foxglove: “Foxglove can be quick... and doesn't hurt all that long”.

As Gates and Appiah (2000, p. i) affirm, Morrison reshapes naturalist fiction to reflect “the burdens of history, the deciding societal impacts of race, gender, or class.” *Love* becomes a microcosm of how power, trauma, and gendered structures define and distort female self-actualization. The discussion affirms that despite moments of resistance, Morrison's characters remain trapped in cycles of oppression unless solidarity and agency are reclaimed through radical self-definition.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for both literary scholars and future researchers:

- (i) Re-centering Female Solidarity in Literary Analysis. Future literary studies should give more attention to female bonding and its potential as a site of resistance, especially in texts where patriarchy seeks to divide women through emotional and sexual competition. A closer reading of female friendships in Morrison's works—and other African-American literature—may yield deeper insight into collective healing and identity formation.
- (ii) Expanding Psychoanalytic Feminist Frameworks. While Freud's and Chodorow's theories provide a foundational lens, future research could explore additional feminist psychoanalytic voices, such as Julia Kristeva or Luce Irigaray, to further unravel how

language, desire, and subjectivity shape female characters' agency and resistance within oppressive systems.

- (iii) Interdisciplinary Approaches to Patriarchy and Trauma. Incorporating insights from trauma studies, cultural studies, and sociology could enrich the understanding of how historical violence, economic dependency, and intergenerational trauma affect female self-actualization. Scholars might explore the intersection of narrative voice, memory, and silence as narrative strategies in resisting erasure.
- (iv) Comparative Studies with Other Morrison Works. Comparative analysis between *Love* and other Morrison novels, such as *Beloved*, *Sula*, or *Paradise*, would provide a broader view of how Morrison constructs female identity across different social and historical contexts. This would also allow for tracing recurring themes such as motherhood, loss, and female autonomy.
- (v) Curriculum Integration and Social Dialogue. Given its critical reflection on gender, race, and power, *Love* should be more widely integrated into literature, gender studies, and cultural studies curricula. The themes explored in this novel can provoke vital classroom discussions around power dynamics, child marriage, female trauma, and the psychological impact of patriarchal oppression.

In conclusion, Morrison's *Love* offers not only a compelling narrative but also a platform for meaningful reflection on the layered oppression women face and the resilience they display. Continued scholarly engagement with this text can serve as a powerful tool for both academic inquiry and social critique.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *Love* vividly portrays the psychological, emotional, and social struggles of Black women as they navigate identity, power, and oppression in a patriarchal society. Through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis and Chodorow's feminist theory, this study has demonstrated that the absence of nurturing parental figures leaves characters like Heed, Christine, and Junior vulnerable to patriarchal manipulation embodied in the figure of Bill Cosey. Their attempts to forge identity are shaped by trauma, disrupted female bonding, and internalized societal hierarchies.

Cosey's presence—both in life and as a ghostly figure—sustains division among women, turning friendships into rivalry and intimacy into competition. The characters' reliance on Cosey for emotional security and material survival ultimately leads to their disempowerment. Yet within this structure of subjugation, Morrison subtly reveals the potential for resistance. The narrator L's final act of poisoning Cosey with foxglove becomes a symbolic reclamation of agency against patriarchal domination.

This paper concludes that Morrison's *Love* critiques the enduring impact of patriarchy and racialized gender norms on female self-actualization. While the characters strive for identity and emotional fulfillment, they remain trapped unless they actively disrupt the systems that bind them. Morrison's novel thus offers a powerful meditation on the necessity of female solidarity, critical self-awareness, and the courage to redefine one's identity outside the boundaries of male control.

#### 5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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