

The role of women in song of solomon critical thinking

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon* focuses on the lives of one, black family unit and in particular, the novel's central protagonist, Macon 'Milkman' Dead III. The novel presents women in a number of ways: as victims, as being in adoration of men, as nurturers and as 'Earth Mothers' who embody the plentiful nature of the Earth. This limited view of women is presented in terms of the limited options that ex-slave, black women had. A feminist reading of this text would also need to incorporate a reading of gender relations within a black community as women, and in particular, Milkman's mother, play secondary roles within the story. However, this does not necessarily reflect Morrison's personal views but rather it reflects the historical role of black women in society; rather, Morrison takes the view that "sexist readings are on the decline... because of the successful appropriation by women of their own discourse." ("Playing in" 14). The novel presents the women as taking a secondary role but their position within the story are equally as important as their male counterparts. The women's role is one of support to the men and allows Milkman, in particular, to become a whole character.

Milkman receives his nickname as a result of being breast fed into adolescence: he is spotted by a local boy, Freddie, and this marks the beginning of the end for his enjoyment of this activity when startled, "she covered her breast, dropping her son on the floor and confirming for him what he had begun to suspect - that these afternoons were strange and wrong." ("Song of" 14). This, alone, presents women in a certain light: his mother has prolonged her son's dependency on her by breastfeeding him for an excessively long time and it is as if she is concerned about no longer

being 'needed' by her son as he approaches adulthood. Certainly, Milkman's mother is presented as being insecure in her role and is, most accurately, described as a victim. This is largely due to the beatings that she receives from Milkman's father.

However, in her non-fiction work, *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison discusses the canonical hegemony of women as fitting a certain role; she challenges the traditional view of women by implying that all works of fiction have a political stance (Beaulieu 274) and, indeed, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison presents the mother as being a distinctly anti-feminist character but is reliant upon her readers to alter that perception into viewing her as a character who nurtured her children and is beaten by her husband but who, underneath it all, knows that she is of better blood than her husband and this allows her to be seen as feminist in her knowledge that regardless of what happens, she is proud of her heritage.

Milkman's mother is perhaps the most interesting character in the novel as she does not conform to the reader's immediate expectations of her. Her relationship with her father goes a long way to defining who she is and alters her gender role in terms of her relationship with her husband. Her father was a doctor whom she worshipped; her husband describes him as being "just about the biggest Negro in this city. Not the richest but the most respected." ("Song of" 71). This suggests that Milkman's father may have married his mother out of some sort of desire to elevate his status. This implies, then, that Milkman's mother held more status than his father, at one time, and therefore this instantly lifts her from being just a housewife and as being a

major part of her husbands ' fleshing out.' Milkman's mother clearly worshipped her father and after his death, Macon Jr. tells his son about seeing his mother " in that bed, sucking [her father's] fingers." (" Song of" 74).

However, we are later told by Milkman's mother that she had been kissing the only part of her father which remained unaffected from his illness. This suggests that Milkman's father, for all his bravado, is an insecure man who is much more dependent on his wife's continued loyalty than he would like to admit. So, whilst Milkman's mother is presented as being submissive to both her husband and her father, as well as pushing the boundaries of being a nurturing mother who relies upon that role to sustain herself, she is also the backbone to all of these men - in particular, to her husband who is sub-consciously vying for her affection with her father, his entire married life.

Whilst women are initially perceived as being submissive to a patriarchal society, in this novel, it is eventually clear that whilst they are in secondary social roles, the women are amongst the strongest characters. Milkman's mother personifies this by being publically beaten by her husband but privately continually causing him to feel threatened by her social standing and her devotion to her father. Many may see her worshipping of her father as allowing herself to be defined by a man but, in reality, she plays upon this to further strengthen her role alongside her husband. The women of this novel represent both the stereotypical and anarchic roles of women: as the nurturer and as the backbone to patriarchal society.

References

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