"SHE BE DEAD:" BLACK FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *HOME*

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Toni Morrison's *Home* explores the effect of trauma and abandonment on people's decisions, life and desire for self-fulfillment and self-actualization. The two focal fields in the novel, army and medical, are subjected to close observation and serious criticism. Brother and sister, Frank and Cee, who inhabit these spheres, struggle to survive against the odds in extremely hazardous surroundings. Their journey through life exposes hidden and frequently forgotten sides of the 1950s. The current paper chooses to trace Cee's path to her own *self* while at the same time it comments on the historical period, the idea of belonging, the male-led narrative, family relations, and the ever-present depiction of the community.

Key words: subjectivity, Toni Morrison, home, community, identity, womanhood, trauma, agency

Toni Morrison's tenth novel, *Home*, published in 2012, furthers the author's project of revisiting and rewriting African American history as well as examining trauma, love, motherhood, community, and subjectivity. The book dramatizes the events surrounding and following the Korean War in the 1950s. Frank Money, a war veteran, undertakes a revelatory journey south to save his sister, Cee, aware only of the message 'she be dead'[1], who we later find had fallen victim to medical experiments. That short message moves the story forward. Frank and Cee's childhood and adolescence proves extremely difficult and as a result they both experience a crisis of identity and belonging. In the end rememory and communal bonding aid them in their quest to self-actualization. The current paper intends to revisit the novel and demonstrate its cultural and historical significance through the analysis of black female subjectivity as

[1] 'She be dead' can mean both 'she is dead' and 'she will be dead' and this ambiguity only exacerbates the incompleteness of the heroine's subjectivity.

represented in the text in view of contemporary theories about gender identity, postmodernism, and race. Through tracing the bond between the siblings and Cee's journey to her *self*, we are able to make apparent the powerful effect that the author's project has in uncovering the hidden side of black life and experience.

The foundations of Frank and Cee's future development are laid down during their childhood. Left alone at an early age, they are forced to live with their grandparents, who appear to be unwilling to care for them in a positive way. About that period Frank says, "Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. At least on the field there is a goal, excitement, daring, and some chance of winning along with many chances of losing… If not for my two friends I would have suffocated by the time I was twelve. They, along with my little sister, kept the indifference of parents and the hatefulness of grandparents an afterthought" (Morrison 2012: 83). He felt stuck in a constant state of non-existent self-expression and boredom. The only thing that saves him and his sister is the human connection and being able to establish comfort outside the hostility of the home. But the dependency that they build between each other actually impedes their individual development later on. It is clear that they channel their love at each other but that raises the question how they feel about themselves individually. According to Justine Tally and Adrienne Seward, "love is something that Frank and Cee must learn" (Tally and Seward 2014: xviii). By "love" they mean self-love that would sustain the individual's identity. The heroine, conditioned to rely on Frank, is left to her own devices when he goes to fight in the war. She struggles to find a place to settle in and is affected negatively by her naivety and passivity. "Cee… she was a shadow for most of my life, a presence marking its own absence, or maybe mine. Who am I without her– that underfed girl with the sad, waiting eyes?" (Morrison 2012: 103), says Frank. It is indicative that her existence is marked by absences as if she only lived in the form of Frank's shadow. Her self-love exists in that same dark space. Frank on the other hand is also not able to achieve a sense of stable identity because he relies on her devotion and worship of him. Cee has to pass through many losses to finally find a community of women who would influence the construction of her subjectivity untied to the influence of her brother. Evelyn Schreiber summarizes that "Morrison's novels explore how loving relationships with individuals and communities assist in the creation of self" (Schreiber 2010: 16), but there always has to be a balance as we have seen in the novel. Excessiveness in anything, be it motherhood, dependence, love, friendship, ultimately leads to negative and

sometimes even horrific ends. The connection between Cee and Frank has to be reformed to include their individuality and not their severe dependence on each other.

The fourth chapter of the novel gives us an overview of the troublesome coming of age of Cee. The section starts with: “A mean grandmother is one of the worst things a girl could have… Grandmothers, even when they’ve been hard on their own children, are forgiving and generous to the grandchildren” (Morrison 2012: 43). It is a significant statement in view of the importance of the grandmother figure in African American literature, culture, and art. Grandmothers are introduced in Morrison’s work as women who epitomize the values of the home; they support, influence, and educate the younger generation when the parents are busy working and earning money for survival. The lack of a strong maternal and grandmother figure in Cee’s life proves destructive. As Valerie Thomas says, she “suffers from a deathlike absence of self-esteem and agency” (Thomas 2014: 196). All literally and metaphorically orphaned characters in Morrison’s work face similar obstacles and are unable to form healthy subjectivities. Lenore, the grandmother, is discontented due to the family’s homeless status and the fact that Cee’s mother gave birth to her while on the road. “Lenore, who believed herself superior to everybody else in Lotus, chose to focus her resentment on the little girl born “in the street” (Morrison 2012: 45). Instead of providing comfort to the lonesome child, the grandmother aims all of her negative emotions at her. In the presented circumstances it would be hard for Cee to assume a positive view of her womanhood. It is uncharacteristic of the author to create a character such as Lenore because in almost all of her other novels grandmothers’ actions lead to positive development and growth, even if they carry negative qualities or do unspeakable things. But probably in her last novels she is attempting to convey that in the real world there exist all types of people, even grandmothers who do not sustain the home.

In chapter 8 we are made aware of Lenore’s point of view and her opinion about the events. “Lenore believed she was merely a strict step-grandmother, not a cruel one. The girl was hopeless and had to be corrected every minute” (Morrison 2012: 88). According to Lenore, she has not acted in a heartless way. She was distrustful of the girl because of her origin, later clumsiness, and lack of ambition. Adding Lenore’s thoughts makes her even more real as a character and blurs the line between fiction and reality. Viewed from her point of view, the situation offers a woman who has to take care of children she did not ask for and did

not need. This unsettledness deeply affects Cee, who does not learn to appreciate and love herself. On a wider scale, Rossitsa Terzieva-Artemis suggests that "Morrison is particularly interested in the analysis of liminal experiences that create a possibility for the rise of a new sense of self in her characters" (Terzieva-Artemis 2010: 191). In *Home* such liminal experiences present themselves when the characters are able to see their past in a new light then review it and accept it. The passive and awkward self that is formed during Cee's childhood has the opportunity to change at the end of the novel. Throughout the narrative she is moving in the direction of the liminal space that would give her safe harbor not available during her coming of age.

In her adolescent years, Cee meets Principal, or as he calls himself, Prince. She is attempting to replace Frank by searching for the next best authoritative figure. "Prince loved himself so deeply, so completely, it was impossible to doubt his conviction. So if Prince said she was pretty, she believed him" (Morrison 2012: 48). Lacking in self-assuredness, Cee craves the one Prince has. Whatever he says the truth is, she believes him, having no other person to look up to or to question. Instead of forming her own subjectivity, she latches onto his. Unable to find a job in Lotus, Prince takes her to Atlanta in search of a better position. It quickly becomes evident that the reason he married her is economical. The union quickly dissolves when he starts leaving her for days on end alone at home. "She was all alone now, sitting in a zinc tub on a Sunday defying the heat… with cool water while Prince was cruising around with his thin-soled shoes pressing the gas pedal in California or New York, for all she knew" (Morrison 2012: 50). She is in a state of abandonment again. First, she was abandoned by her parents, then by her brother, and now by her husband. She occupies transient spaces of human connection and love that are not able to influence her positively and educate her on how to survive on her own. Her womanhood is repressed and hidden. We are presented with a fractured identity in the process of change. In the 1980s, Cora Kaplan writes an essay on the topic of subjectivity and reworks her previous ideas, being influenced by current critical theories and her own experiences. She suggests that all consciously held subjectivities have a fractured and fluctuant condition and that it is impossible to think about "will-full, unified and coherent subject". She also adds: "I would rather see subjectivity as always in process and contradiction, even female subjectivity, structured, divided and denigrated through the matrices of sexual difference" (Kaplan 1986: 226-7). So, according to her, the coherent subject does not exist in reality, she prefers the idea of a subject constantly

in process and change. This is particularly applicable in Cee's case: she moves in with her grandparents – she changes; she loses her brother – she transforms again; she relocates to Atlanta – her evolution continues. The next step she takes, entering the work force, is no less influential to the constitution of her identity. While Frank's journey south turns him into a modern Odysseus, the stepping stones in Cee's situation make her life equally heroic and immersive even though on the face of it this is his story.

When commenting on *Song of Solomon*'s male-led narrative, Cynthia Davis claimed that "the use of a male hero does not… necessarily imply the subjugation of women… to some extent, women are displaced because of the problem Morrison has studied all along – central versus peripheral perceptions – and she makes it clear that concentration on his life is not a denial of others" (Davis 1998: 37). *Home* presents a similar conundrum with the story, being presented through Frank's perspective and his journey. But here, as it is evident in *Song of Solomon*, the choice of narrative structure does not delimit the female characters and their arcs. They develop despite their environment and struggles. Cee's journey is as important as Frank's because it offers another gendered glimpse into subjectivity and historical time.

After working as a waitress for some time, Cee finds a better-paying position as a helper at Dr. Beauregard Scott's office. Early foreshadowing of the doctor's actions comes in the form of a compliment by the doctor's wife during Cee's interview. "He is more than a doctor; he is a scientist and conducts very important experiments. His inventions help people. He's no Dr. Frankenstein" (Morrison 2012: 60). The young impressionable girl is inspired by his noble cause because she is not equipped enough to read the signs. "Her admiration for the doctor grew even more when she noticed how many more poor people–women and girls, especially–he helped… When all of his dedicated help didn't help and a patient got much worse he sent her to a charity hospital in the city" (Morrison 2012: 64). He chooses people and especially people from the lower class because they would not oppose him and would be willing to surrender their bodies to the medical professional. The novel exposes a historical practice of treating the bodies of poor black women as disposable. Jean Wyatt even posits that the person's humanity is erased and the body turns into a specimen, "a collection of body parts" (Wyatt 2017: 156). Through writing about this issue, Toni Morrison opens up a new avenue of thought on the problem of body politics. Bodies populate the text and are inscribed with symbolic meaning all over. Seeing the person as a collection of body parts poses difficulties for their subjectivity, agency, and in Cee's case, womanhood. Cee succumbs to the

doctor's procedures in time and transforms into one more disposable body for him to experiment on. Sarah, who also works in the doctor's house/office, recounts the events: "What she didn't know was when he got so interested in wombs in general, constructing instruments to see farther and farther into them… But when she noticed Cee's loss of weight, her fatigue, and how long her periods were lasting, she became frightened" (Morrison 2012: 113). Cee loses agency over her body which simultaneously brings to mind the practices during slavery and lowers her chances of ever gaining subjectivity. She becomes her reproductive organs. If Frank had not saved her, she would have remained one of the many silent and nameless victims of medical experiments. Carol Henderson, while giving an overview of body politics, writes that "African American culture… confronts… silencing the voice of the subjugated by creating moments of resistance or 'loopholes of retreat' that not only speak of the resilience of African American people but also allow for the reconceptualization of literal and figurative bodies within certain delimiting social structures" (Henderson 2002: 6). In other words, black writers rewrite bodies to free them of the limits imposed on them by the society. In *Home* the times are etched on Cee's body and at the end she finds a way to resist and to reclaim her body and self. On a wider scale, when discussing whether distinct female writing exists, Julia Kristeva is cautious and abstains from generalizations but still finds that "they [women writers] invite us to see, touch and smell a body made of organs whether they are exhibited by satisfaction or horror". She continues "it is as if the effects giving rise to inter-subjective relations and social projects… were reduced to the level of secretions and intestines, carefully disguised by the culture of the past but now on open display" (Kristeva 1987: 112). We can agree with Kristeva that the body as a focal point for symbolization appears to characterize many texts written by women. What differentiates African American women writers is their unique perspective stemming from centuries of marginalization and the ability to imbue the narrative with the actual physical or psychological violation of women's bodies. Cee's claim on her body would turn into her claim on agency, subjectivity, and womanhood.

Frank brings Cee back to Lotus and seeks help from a community of women who give them valuable lessons and return Cee back to life by employing communal healing methods. An interesting opposition between the medical tradition (science) as represented by Dr. Beauregard's office and women's healing practices (magic) in Lotus exists in the novel. There is a long tradition of discrediting women as healers (both of people and communities) and putting faith into "accepted" medical practices. Linda

Gordon elaborates on this long-standing issue and suggests that "magic and science [have] had the same roots and may even have once been identical" (Gordon 2006: 33). History in turn has given prevalence to science and made it the only normative model of healing. Cee's experience subverts the prescribed role of science by showing that *women's healing* is more effective and life-affirming not only for survival of the body but also of the self. Cee's subjectivity is directly linked to her entering into the women's community and their practices.

The women tell her: "You ain't a mule to be pulling some evil doctor's wagon" and ask her directly: "Who told you you was trash?" (Morrison 2012: 122). They assure her of her strength and value by suggesting that she is not a silent victim available for somebody's purposes. Miss Ethel further elaborates on the topic of self-worth by saying: "Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too" (Morrison 2012: 126). She goes to the heart of the problem that marginalized people should persevere and attain individuality and subjectivity. Ethel urges Cee to let go of the chains of dependence, be it on family or a husband; she wants to teach the young girl how to start thinking of herself as a person and as a result, become one. The African American person has frequently, not to say always, relied on the guidance of the community to achieve agency and freedom as evidenced in literature and history. Finally, the lessons land, and Cee takes on a new perspective. "If she did not respect herself, why should anybody else?" (Morrison 2012: 129). The change does not happen overnight, but she starts asking the right questions when it comes to the question of wholesome black subjectivity. One of the examples of her crossing certain boundaries is the way she accepts the fact that she has become sterile. Instead of running away from the truth and looking for another shelter or authority, she comes to turns with the situation and is not afraid to face the pain. The only thing she is left with after the fact are the recurring images of an unborn child. Maxine Montgomery links this child with the ghost in *Beloved* and says that: "The ghost child assumes a more abstract, ephemeral role as an incarnation of the maternal guilt the young woman feels because she cannot bear children. The ghostly apparition is also a constant reminder of the physical wound […] that the young woman must carry for the rest of her life" (Montgomery 2012: 329). Besides being a constant reminder and a memory, the image is there to test her strength and not let her put down her guard again. It reminds her what the lack of

healthy individuality can lead to. As a whole, the body remains the carrier of meaning and memory of the past.

In the 1990s, Seyla Benhabib starts questioning Judith Butler's gender theories and in particular her idea of performativity. Benhabib claims that, according to Butler "all that the self is, is a series of performances" and later asks, "if we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and only let it rise if one can have a say in the production of the play itself?" (Benhabib 2007: 215). Even though she criticizes Judith Butler for excluding agency, Benhabib does not offer a clear solution to the problem of constructing subjectivity when she published her book. A few years later in a new article she presents her take on subjectivity: "I would like to suggest a 'narrative' model of subjectivity and identity construction in place of the 'performativity' model" (Benhabib 1999: 341) and further explains: "To be and to become a self is to insert oneself into webs of interlocution; it is to know how to answer when one is addressed; in turn it is learning how to address others… our agency consists in our capacity to weave out of those narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us as unique individual selves". Benhabib introduces one more layer by adding that "the codes of established narratives in various cultures define our capacity to tell the story in very different ways" and particularly praises Toni Morrison for giving a voice to black women and for contributing to the understanding of the self across racial and gender divides and last but not least, for using her narratives to empower the whole community (Benhabib 1999: 344). Benhabib's theory interestingly entangles the self with narration, which seems to fall close to Toni Morrison's own preoccupation in writing and teaching. Through narration Morrison rewrites many topics, including trauma, gender, race, memory, subjectivity, identity, class, love, etc. When Cee changes her view of her self-worth, she alters the flow and structure of her thoughts that, in a way, transforms the narrative of her life. In other words, the subjectivity the heroine gains unveils the ultimate goal of the author to tell the story of the disadvantaged and, in most cases, to find some potential for healing. Faced with the trauma of the past, Frank and Cee come face to face with their home. Cee starts working on a quilt which is indicative of her changed perception of her world – it has become more multifaceted and close to artistry and folk traditions. Together with Frank she buries in the quilt the man they had witnessed being killed when young. This marks their final acceptance of the past; now they are free to go home.

Toni Morrison's tenth novel, *Home*, tells the story of Korean War veteran Frank who embarks on a journey south to save his sister Cee, who had fallen into trouble. On his way, he considers the past and the present, painting the picture of a boring and traumatic childhood, the horror of war, and its aftermath. The reader acquires knowledge about the dependent relationship he has with his sister and how that impedes both of them in gaining subjectivity. Constantly lacking a sense of belonging, Cee oscillates between complete dependency and abandonment. The aim of this paper was to analyze her character in depth and in this way comment on different aspects of black female subjectivity. Cee's development into a self-sufficient individual is hard and marked by many difficulties but ultimately triumphant. *Home* treads lightly over themes already introduced by the author in her previous works, but it manages to bring a fresh angle on issues connected with war, home, body, love, loss, orphanhood, communal bonding and identity. The shortest of all her novels, it has a significant place in Morrison's oeuvre.

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