

Illness, Care, Love and Today's American Family: A Comparative Study of the Novels

“Miss Janie's Girls and Sula”

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Abstract

This study examines how the novels Miss Janie's Girls and Sula discussed the family life, illness, fight against pandemics, and need for care during a time of combatting the disease. This study has more importance in the context of the pandemic Covid-19 situation that laid stress on social distancing while the immediate demand of the patient is taking care of by the family members. This study establishes a link between fighting with a deadly disease and feminism, and for that, it brings a comparative analysis of the issues e.g. illness, care, love, and today's American family from the 1970s to the 2020s selected fiction. The influence of changed living style on family relations, in contemporary American family life, with an emphasis on family love is underscored in facing the challenge of lethal diseases. However, this article concludes that the family also expands to the adopted children and fostered mothers.

Keywords: Combating Disease, Family Love, Fostered Mothers, Female Bonding

Introduction

The present time is a time of living in an urban post-modern world, as the bigger part of the world population is residing in urban areas. Thus this era is, no doubt, “the urban era”. This urbanization, changed the living style and technological developments have given rise to a big number of challenges of different sorts founded on finance, health, social values, and psychological ailments of various natures. Under these challenges, lifestyle is much changed. This study brings into the analysis of the issues of family, love, the psychological need of care while combatting the monster of a pandemic or fatal disease as cancer and Alzheimer's (dementia). The recent novel *Miss Janie's Girls* (2020) by Carolyn Brown highlights the importance of family while facing the big challenge of fatal disease as cancer. This study is significant especially in the context of COVID-19 that has badly affected families and especially the elders at home in all parts of the world. The focus of this study is not one but multifaceted: caring need in combatting illness; social setbacks of changed lifestyle in today's America; and psychological challenges created by the diseases that can take life as cancer and COVID-19.

There are certain books written combating fatal diseases. One such book is *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) by Susan Sontag. Sontag writes, “Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick” (Sontag, 1978, p.1). The writer Sontag talks about fatal diseases as cancer and tuberculosis, and then she highlights the issue of AIDS. The writer does not write much about the physical illness but mainly brings fore the way the society shows the response to such diseases and misconstructions plus stereotypical approaches of the people about monstrous diseases.

The Great Mortality (2005) by John Kelly in which the writer brings for the havoc played by Black Plague in the 14th century that had made a big change in the world by killing 25 million people in Europe and Asia. Kelly writes a complete dramatic narrative while highlighting the sadness, gloom, prejudice, and the sacrifice by people for each other at the time of emotional need of care.

The Cancer Journals (1980) by Audre Lorde highlights the writer's personal experience of cancer. This collection of essays explores the connection between breast cancer and feminism. Lorde

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analyses the cultural pressure that the women have to bear as they must look as “normal”, and then the way her diagnosis is shaped by her being a black lesbian feminist poet.

Theoretical Framework

As time changes, the family structure and value system also change. Pepper Schwartz (1988) writes in, “The Family as a Changed Institution”, that the American family does consist of voluntary relationship values where the life partners can leave each other and the children develop their associations outside the family. “The divorce rate is high as the women’s rights and emphasis on self over the community have created the flexible idea of family” (Schwartz, 1988, p.55). Schwartz points out that the traditional concept of family was shattered based on enlightened self-interest and radical change in the family idea. Schwartz opines that in a family structure one needs to compromise his/her self-centered interest in favor of the mutual good of the whole family.

Materialism is the bottom line of a new lifestyle everywhere in the urbanized society and the spiritual values are non-existent. It reminds me of the comments about modern city life by Jan Furman: “The city offers them with possibility... .. but in giving themselves over to their dream selves, they become people neither recognized...” (Furman, 2003, p. 94-95). Although these remarks are meant for Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, they throw light on Miss Janie and her adopted daughters’ detachment from their fostered mother in *Miss Janie’s Girls*. It is an emotional and touching story replete with love and heartache. Miss Janie had shown much love when she adopted Teresa and Kayla. All three of them were from obnoxious homes. Later on, both the girls left Janie and never returned, a big disappointment for Miss Janie.

Adopting a child has been an important part of the American lifestyle and its role has increased since the 1980s (Creak et al., 2007, 140). The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) adoption standards (2000) assert to attest the applicants’ emotional maturity, capacity to parent effectively and causes for adoption (Crea et al., 2007, 141). This study brings for the element of love between adopted daughters and fostered mother in Miss. Janie’s *Girls* by analyzing the issue of female bonding, linked with feminism, especially in a time of crisis or fighting an illness. The female bonding is an important feminist concern in Morrison’s Novel *Sula* (1973) which is brought into comparative critical focus here to understand the value of female friendship and mutual bonding of love in *Miss Janie’s Girls*.

Female bonding is an important concern valued and brought into critical focus by many theorists such as Obioma Nnameka, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Elizabeth Abel, and Carole Boyce Davies (Ahmad et al., 2020), who advocate women’s bonding and friendship as the topmost need of all the women. Female bonding is the friendship of women that is a non-sexual relationship by nature with a focus on giving and receiving moral and emotional support, sharing experiences, and spending a good time while nurturing and caring for each other. This kind of bonding may also occur in mother-daughter relationships or a general relation among any women. Clenora Hudson-Weems clarifies the concept of such a relationship in these words:

This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women...; Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other. (Hudson-Weems, 1998, p. 65)

Failure of Female Bonding in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973)

There has been a debate on whether Morrison is a representative of the black people only or her concerns are universal. Joan Bischoff, comparing Morrison to a “great” canonical author, Henry James, invokes the language of universalism as a credit to Morrison: “Though her characters’ problems are conditioned by the black milieu of which she writes, her concerns are broader, universal ones.” (1975: 21). One of such universal concern that Morrison intends to seek through her writing is the survival of women through female bonding and friendship. Laura Dubek mentions this aspect in critical works on Morrison’s “women’s solidarity as central themes in the novels by black African women” (Dubek, 2001, p. 212). Morrison presents various angles of women’s relationships and relevant social perspectives by exploring the social and psychological aspects of female friendship while exposing the challenges it faces.

Women’s friendship provides a dependable source for the woman that is not concerned with self-centeredness and it elevates the women on the ladder of a blissful life. Morrison shows such a relationship in her novel *Sula* published in 1973. In this novel, Nel and Sula formulate a form of bonding that allows their mutual growth and development. However, such sisterhood tends to suffer from tensions and conflicts. The female friendship in Morrison, therefore, involves two phases. First,

female friendship starts and develops in response to outside pressures, and then this friendship suffers setbacks with an emergent detachment. Morrison highlights the solidarity that characterizes the first phase of friendships, as Obioma Nnaemeka observes, "There are other channels, such as ...sisterhood" (1997, p.19) for women's freedom and growth. Morrison highlights the harmony that embodies the first phase of friendships and the difficulties that cause the failure of the second phase of friendship. The second phase of female friendship fails because of the role of certain factors such as self-centeredness and absorption in other things such as marriage by ignoring the value of female friendship.

Nel's marriage makes an end to the friendship between Nel and Sula. The girlhood bonding between Nel and Sula turns into a sour relationship that keeps them estranged for the rest of their lives. This section discusses the theme of female friendship. While foregrounding the healing power of female bonding which may allow women to survive under any kind of pressure, Morrison brings fore that this bonding may be corrupted by other forces as marriage. Morrison is not against marriage; however, what she emphasizes is the due importance to be given to female bonding along with meeting the demands of marriage. Other than this, problems as self-centeredness, failure to handle differences, and unconscious psychological drives destabilize female friendship.

The girlhood relationship between Nel and Sula does not remain a stable bonding in adulthood. Despite the strength and intensity of friendship between the two girls during their adolescent years, their mutual bond disintegrates as they grow mature. Morrison uses this ultimate failure to warn women by reminding them of the destructive power of other bondings and bindings. The best friend's marriage creates a gap in Sula's life that could not be fulfilled by any other person or relation. In marrying Jude, Nel turns her back on a female friendship that used to be a source of comfort. Sula and Nel's union and mutual approval denote a psychic harmony but it breaks after Nel's marriage with Jude. Sula and Nel destroy their friendship by their involvement in self-centeredness which entails Nel's inner death and Sula's actual death.

Sula is represented as an outsider in the novel. She appears as a character that chooses her path, leaves the traditional life and gender roles, and instead follows the ways that are commonly connected with men. Morrison states:

She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, and drops a woman. She is adventuresome, she trusts herself, she is not scared, and she ain't scared. And she is curious and will leave and try any things. (Morrison, 1973.p. 392).

However, the irony is that nothing of the above can fill up the gap of Nel's friendship in her life. Sula is absent for ten years from Medallion trying hard to find love and the "same language of love" (Morrison, 1973. p.120). As a refugee and stranger, she remains on the margin of all borders. She "had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a companion and could never be – for a woman (Morrison, p.121). Sula realizes that she can't find love and a friend like Nel and so continues to live in her world in estrangement from all around. "There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness" (Morrison, 1973. p.147). Her loneliness does not welcome other people in the true sense and her solitude does allow a fruitful interaction with others. Finally, Sula expires loneliness. At that moment Sula has the retention of friendship with Nel as both are "two throats and one eye" (Morrison, 1973. p.147). At her death bed when Nel comes to see her, the silence of Sula is telling Nel that their friendship was the most valuable thing for both of them which Nel could not understand.

Talking to her grandmother Eva, Sula says, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison, 1973. p. 92). This task of "making" herself and then Nel's marriage with Jude brings her detachment from Nel and this detachment puts her in complete seclusion. Sula loses the one and only true friend she ever has. Later on, she remains wandering for finding a true friend but knows "that a lover was not a comrade and could never be — for a woman" (Morrison, 1973. p.121). Through this portrayal, Morrison compares a male lover to a female friend and makes her readers realize the importance of female friendship. Sula leaves the Bottom to engage in a self-building project which lasts till the end of her life but she could not find a friend like Nel. During making herself, Sula does not think ever to marry or have children, "To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood." (Galehouse, 1999, p. 352). Motherhood requires taking care of others and caring for the other is not in Sula's scheme of life: "Her journey is the enactment of freedom" (Stein, 2000, p. 54). This self-centeredness is a major factor behind the failure of any kind

of relationship including friendship, particularly friendship with Nel. As Sula is “dangerously free,” so nothing matters more for her but her freedom. Morrison says to Robert Stepto in an interview, “She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignores them” (Lestienne, 2020, p.35). Thus, she does not care about anything or any kind of responsibility in a relationship. However, there was one relationship that was valued by her, friendship with Nel, and when that was broken; no other bonding could mature and become fruitful. It was her sisterhood with Nel that was the most valuable thing and a source of comfort and pleasures.

Thus, this novel brings to the fore the primacy of female bonding over other things and encourages women to cultivate female friendship as a means for security and comfort. Sula's death serves as a major critique of the need for relationships among females. Nel feels shattered after the death of her childhood rebellious friend Sula. Nel has rejected Sula for years and breaks the silence only when she hears that her friend is dying. If Nel does not make her complete through marriage, Sula fails to substitute independence for female friendship since she ultimately lives and dies alone.

In a word, Sula cannot share with other members of the female community an important quality which bell hooks calls “love”, “We do not fear annihilation, for we know no one can destroy our integrity as women who love” (Morrison, 2002, p. 137).

If Sula's self-making project remains in focus throughout her life, Nel's lack of self-knowledge also continues for a long time until Sula's death opens her mind and makes her find out the value of her past relationship with her friend. Through deep thinking, she gets a realization of the value of female bonding, and “it is Sula who leads her to it” (Reddy, 2000, p. 10). Nel, at last, recognizes that she does not suffer so much from Jude's parting as from her detachment from Sula. Through retrospection Nel comes to this understanding as is clear from these lines:

All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. We were girls together, she said as though explaining something. O Lord, Sula, she cried, girl, girl, and girl. (Morrison, p. 174)

Through this cry, Nel laments over the loss of her friendship with Sula, the value of which she has just understood. The utterance of three similar words “girl” shows the value of her girlhood relationship with Sula and the extent to which she misses her time with Sula. For all these valuable but now lost years she has denied herself the company of Sula. Demetrakopoulos rightly mentions it, “Nel is alone; Sula dead, and we see how much of the pain is solitary. Even the realization of loss is often too late” (Morrison, 1987, p. 90).

Even though Morrison encourages women to make a sincere commitment to female friendship, what she portrays in *Sula* is failed sisterhood. Morrison paints a gloomy picture by the end since the friendship between Sula and Nel fails. Through the failure, Morrison brings to the fore various challenges faced by female bonding and warns women about the dangers of self-centeredness. Nel and Sula have not been careful enough to avoid this swamp, and they end up paying a high price. Through the portrayal of both characters, the reader can see the loss of female friendship and the resultant damage.

By exploring the situation of the two girls in *Sula*, Morrison guides her female readers to see the importance of female bonding in domestic and social life. Morrison emphasizes the clearing up differences and highlights the point that it may not come if it remains at the level of a shallow sisterhood. The same is pointed out by bell hooks: “Sisterhood ... was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity” (Hooks, 2002, p. 130). Although Morrison (1973) supports female friendship yet she does not bring an example of a successful sisterhood in this novel. However, Carolyn Brown (2020) shows successful female bonding in her novel *Miss Janie's Girls*.

Movement from detachment to the reunion in *Miss Janie's Girls*

Miss Janie's Girls (2020) is a novel that brings fore the story of a fostered mother and her two adopted girls Kayla and Teresa. Its setting is a town in Texas. The girls after growing to a proper age leave their fostered mother for city life with more excitement showing an extreme level of selfishness. Until now the story has similarities with Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973). The two girls Sula and Nel leave each other on the path of their individual choices as analyzed above: Nel for marrying Jude and Sula on the path of making herself. This makes both blind to the love of each other, as a result, Sula dies crying for her friend. But in *Miss Janie's Girls*, the writer brings the females reunion by ending the callousness and selfishness of the main female characters: the mother and the two young adopted girls.

The story of *Miss Janie's Girls* reveals that a French Jewish girl from Paris and an American boy happen to meet each other, start loving each other and then marry, and then they have to be separated because of the War eruption. Twin girls are born to Miss Janie out of this wedlock but the girls under eighteen were not permitted to nurture their babies without the permission of their parents. She keeps on yearning for those baby girls and feeling a hole in her heart. Then she grows up and adopts two girls in need of a home, Theresa and Kayla. Time moves on, the girls after graduating from high school move away from Miss Janie's home to have their lives as they desire. Miss Janie, in her 70's suffering from cancer and dementia, calls on her nephew Noah who occasionally sees Miss Janie. She asks him to search for not only Theresa and Kayla but to find out her lost girls too. Then the story takes an interesting turn and shows the value of love within a "blended family" and how that love makes an older sick lady's life full of sweetness.

Alzheimer's disease is a brain sickness that gradually destroys memory and thinking abilities, and then the capability to execute modest tasks. In most people the symptoms of Alzheimer's start appearing in their mid-60s. This disease is the most common reason for dementia — "a constant decline in thinking, behavioral and social skills that disrupts a person's ability to function independently". The cancer is itself a life taking illness and in combination with Alzheimer's, Miss Janie was in dire need of not only physical maintenance but a spiritual carefulness by the close relations. The writer comes up with a story that provides such care with a family reunion.

Miss Janie is forced to shun her twin small girls at age 15. Then the story makes a jump of 60 years when she is having cancer and Alzheimer's disease. She direly needs the love and care of her lost daughters and adopted girls. Her mind makes a big jump from age 15 to age 76 and all the times in between. Thus, the sadness being felt by her can be guessed. However brilliant Love lessons are learned- the love between adopted daughters and mother.

By portraying the estrangement in family relations of the central characters on account of young girls' attachment to modern standards of a freestyle life in detachment from their home sweet home, the writer discloses the complexity involved in the youngsters seeking reunion with their families. The "revolt from the family" move needs to be switched over to a "reunion with family" move, shunning self-centered individual pursuits. Individuality is not being disfavored by the writer, rather the emphasis is on taking individualism and collectivism side by side as the family is concerned, particularly with the point of view of family women. However, the writer has expanded the canvass of the family to adopted daughters and fostered mothers thus giving value to the modern issue of adoption.

The cold indifference of the current lifestyle in today's America is compared with the 'togetherness' of the family. The vice of the family breakdown has collapsed the innocent simplicity of family life. In the words of Channel Hilfer, a need for "mental escape" (Channel Hilfer, 2008, p. 5) is needed in a time of the fast-changing world for accepting the adoration of the family values. From this perspective, Carolyn Brown should be read as revolutionary literary participation in this "reunion with family" move against "revolt from the family" move. She does not idealize the rural simple life at the expense of the urbanized milieu for the consideration of the family value of togetherness. Rather, she focuses on inculcating the human values of compassion and love among the family members. The young characters tend to display a detachment from family ambiance because such an adjustment demands care and responsibility but the point to note is this family care should be taken as a scheme of life. She brings a revolutionary vision via literary endeavor that there should be no necessity of "old homes" in the future in America.

In Morrison's *Sula* the two characters who show alienation from the bonding of each other are the two females, however, one leaves the other for a male Jude. But in Carolyn Brown's *Miss Janie's Girls* the writer has brought into focus, the mutual female-female relationship in the families. And the writer has a special reason for her choice of females as the central characters in this novel for showing the importance of female bonding. Carolyn shares with Morrison the similar concerns of female independence and autonomy that require the cooperation of females. But Carolyn focuses here the family love among family females of different ages: old and young to enjoy autonomous relationships within a blissful family. Without caring for Miss Janie, both the girls left the old lady and there seemed to be no chances of their coming back to her which shocks Miss Janie. However, after a long time, Kayla and Teresa both come back to take care of Miss Janie on her call as she's suffering from two diseases cancer and dementia in old age.

The treatment of cancer and tending of the old lady for taking care of her medical needs is not the only point raised but the more important is to understand the emotional need of the old family members. The old sick lady needs that the three of them live together for the rest of her life and she is much comforted and pleased by this togetherness. Unlike the two female friends in Morrison's *Sula*, who remain detached for the rest of their lives after separation, the women in Carolyn Brown's *Miss Janie's Girls* are remained united happily with one another after coming back home. The story has certain sad moments but is presented in such a way that the readers have smiled at human compassion and get the hope of such a code of union with caring attitudes in the families. This book should be taken as an eye-opener for the teenagers to create in them a realization for taking care of their grandmothers in today's world. It gives us back the concept of family and home as the best part of the world for showing love and be loved, for taking care and be cared.

Carolyn Brown brings forth the issue of choice between the two types of love: self-centered love and caring love. Miss Janie loves her daughters with all her soul; however, her daughters are separated from her for personal reasons. Their decision to leave her fostered mother for their independent future highlights a modern girl's mode of life away from mother love in today's America, to achieve freedom and the status of free autonomous individuals. The writer does not deny the importance of new forms of living styles but she also wants her readers to give value to family love. Both the girls restore their past relationship with their mother Miss Janie in such a form that does not create any hindrance in pursuing success in the cosmopolitan world.

Conclusion

Female friendship provides women dependability transcends the interests of self and is an association to help and elevate each other. Carolyn Brown brings fore this form of bonding in her novel *Miss Janie's Girls* as women characters develop ties of family love among themselves. Here, the women develop a form of bond that makes them grow and develop each other. The female relationship brought forward by Carolyn Brown in this novel, therefore, involves three phases. First, female bonding starts under some external pressures as the two girls have to take shelter with Miss Janie by becoming her adopted daughters. Second, this bonding meets with a set-back and they separate from each other for a long time. Third, their detachment ends and they unite again but this time with more compassion, love, and sympathetic human grounds. Carolyn highlights the solidarity that characterizes female relationships.

The particularity of Carolyn's novel is that it creates a realization in the readers that this female bonding is much more needed in today's indifferent world. In old days it was patriarchy that was the enemy of female friendship as in Morrison's *Sula* (1973) but in today's America, it is the modern living style that makes them estranged from each other.

Finally, this novel brings a realization for its readers to understand the pain endured by the family of George Floyd, the black American who was murdered recently on the road in day-light with the utterance of the cries: I can't breathe. His family was not allowed to see him with him in the last minutes of his life. Furthermore, this novel highlights the worth of the family, in the context of pandemic Corvid-19 that has powerfully affected families at home. Summing up, this novel *Miss Janie's Girls* is an account of forgiveness, of reawakening, and venerating the elders in today's America.

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