

## Conflict and contradiction: Toni Morrison's views on wealth and family in *love* (2003)

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### Abstract

Wealth is generally considered to offer serenity to life and give it certain rhythm. In our times, wealth has occupied a central place in life. For a family, wealth is given a privileged place of peace maker; it is supposed to bring tranquility and harmony between the members of a family. Wealth diminishes the concretized nexus of broken relations and bring people close. Hopes with wealth and money in our times are high, expectations perpetual. But in Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) wealth becomes an instrument that disintegrates the Cosey family and turns them against each other. Morrison unveils some issues pertaining to misunderstandings and its consequences. This paper analyses Morrison's novel *Love* and demonstrate how wealth becomes a reason of confusion and hatred between Cosey family members and sets them on the journey of self- destruction.

**Keywords:** serenity, wealth, privilege, expectations, disintegration

### Introduction

The novel *Love* (2003) <sup>[1]</sup> revolves around the Cosey family and its members. The narrative of the novel unfolds as a commentary signifying the fate of Cosey family and "the intimate relationship that women have and how they can be damaged by the random cruelties of fate and time" (Lashley). Cosey family goes through different stages of emergence and destruction. The destruction of the family is mainly due to the second marriage of Bill Cosey. Morrison has demonstrated that a single error of a successful person could change the fate of many people. Those who seem to be indifferent to every trouble in life could be trapped in the tempest of problems. The problems created by Bill Cosey's second marriage prove to be perpetual. The misconception of the one family member regarding another deteriorates the relation between them and Cosey family faces an unrecoverable lose. V. Sathyaraj and G. Neelakantan argue:

Morrison's *Love* is a powerful defense of centrality of family and parental affiliation which makes a significant difference to the physical and psychic well-being of the children....the novelist rediscovers with insight and clarity the supreme role of family and parents in shaping responsible individual.

Nicole Moses says that "Morrison delivers a vivid and stirring account of the turmoil that ensues when young women are deprived of the parental—but mostly paternal—*love* and guidance that is their birthright". As the novel opens, a reader finds only two members of Cosey family alive, Heed and Christine, wife and grand-daughter of Bill Cosey respectively. Bill Cosey himself has died some twenty-five years ago. As the narrative progress we come to know that Bill Cosey's first wife Julia died when his son Billy Boy was only twelve years old. Bill Cosey's son Billy Boy also dies young leaving behind a widow, May, and a baby girl, Christine. It is May

who takes care of Christine as well as Cosey Hotel and Resort with the help of L. Whole novel is narrated in third person narrative but L's comments are in first person narrative. L is also dead but lives around as phantom, "her presence is quite ghostly but her words wise as she opens and then closes the story" (Deusner).

### Bill Cosey and his symbolic Boating

From this point the narration goes back in the history of Cosey family. Bill Cosey, the head of the family, has been a rich man. He has acquired his wealth through passions and confidence and has set an example in Black people. Bill Cosey had both good and bad qualities. He helps poor and needy in the difficult times but he is also a sexually amoral person who has relation with different women. After the death of his first wife, his son Billy Boy also dies. Bill Cosey at this stage marries Heed, the eleven year old playmate of his granddaughter. This proves to be a turning point in the future of Cosey family. Probably this endeavour of Bill Cosey ruined him and invited the tragedy of Cosey family. "Mr. Cosey serves as the conductor for all the collected trauma" which thereafter emerges in Cosey family (Lashley).

The novel separately throws light on each character. The narrator comments on the condition of each character and the circumstances that a particular character faces. Bill Cosey at cursory level seems to be a very happy man. But his mental agony comes to surface when he is on a boating trip with Sandler Gibbons and asks him what people think about him. His way of posing this question is sympathetic, to quote from the novel: "what do they think about me? ... you all. You know behind my back" (42). Bill Cosey is aware of both the things; on the one hand his ruined reputation due to his connections with several women and on the other hand due to his second marriage with Heed, which ruined the peace of his home. Bill Cosey's courage was mainly broken by the death of his son by what they call "walking pneumonia."

Bill Cosey after marrying Heed faces hard time mentally as well as socially. Heed was only eleven years old when Bill Cosey married her. In Cosey house hold, there was no sign of peace between its members, Christine and May on the one hand and Heed on the other hand could not develop a mutual understanding, and there frequently occurred quarrels between them. It certainly affected Bill Cosey, he could not maintain his *love* equally towards May and Christine on the one hand and Heed on the other hand. "The marriage removes Christine from her presumptive place in her grandfather's affection" (Mellard 702). Bill Cosey remained biased towards his wife, Heed, which makes Christine and May feel jealous and it also creates a nexus between the Cosey family members.

First the death of young son than the regular quarrels at home, places Bill Cosey in the arms of the other women like Celestial but he does not keep his relation limited to that woman only. Tessa Roynon opines that "he is unquestionably a morally problematic figure" (45). He was admired by everyone, and he had "more friends than honey had bees." Yet he could not fill the gap that was created in his life. Family was not fulfilling the role it is supposed to play rather it would be more appropriate to say that there could not be a family when one marries a child. Bill Cosey married Heed before her first period. The question arises in the mind of a reader, how much aware she would have been regarding the duties of a wife?

Bill Cosey being a rich man faces hard time inside his home, money was not enough to keep him happy thus initially he entertained himself with various women but with the passage of time he kept losing interest in business because "Bill Cosey was simply tired" (37). Bill Cosey failed to have mutual understanding and good relation with his daughter-in-law, May, which is another fact that drained the peace of Cosey family. Good relation could have brought peace in the wretched life of Bill Cosey. Erroneously, he was living with the illusion that everyone around him was under him. It set him on the perpetual journey of mental stress. What could have been brought happiness in the Cosey house when Bill Cosey was more interested in his self-indulgence?

Bill Cosey's restless life at home made him to find alternative ways of enjoyment and avoid his family tensions; one of the ways he finds out is boating trips. His lingered widowhood he planned to "end by marrying a girl" (110). But marriage with Heed had a negative impact on his family. "If that had worked out for him as planned, Cosey might have limited his boat activity to fish caught with a hook instead of wallet" (ibid). So, what Bill Cosey had expected from his second marriage turned out quite contrary. His attempt to make a family resulted in strained family relations in which a member tries to kill other family member by setting her bed on fire. Bill Cosey's prospect of prosperous married life with Heed was not culminated, Heed herself accepts that "at first [...] for few years he was good to me" (186). But as time passed, the rhythm of their life kept decreasing along with the sales of the hotel. The strained relation resulted in Bill Cosey's lose of interest in everything. He did not care about the hotel or house and let everything to be destroyed. Bill Cosey, "a commanding, beautiful man surrendering to feuding women, letting them ruin all he had built" (136).

### **Heed and her Inclusion**

Heed belonged to Johnsons who were poor and their girls were also considered immoral who were expert in "skirt raising department". The main motive to marry Heed was to save her from poverty. Marriage with Bill Cosey gave Heed financial security and she also helped to her relatives by giving them some money and other goods. "Heed's marriage to Cosey brought financial and socio-political gains" to her (Wardi 209). She occupied a privileged position in Cosey family and had an important role to play as the wife of Cosey family head. But to survive at this privileged place Heed has to win war against May and Christine who considered that the status that was due to them Heed deprived them.

The Cosey women turn Cosey family into a battle field. May, who invests all her energies in the progress of hotel, has to submit all her will to an eleven year old girl, Heed. And Heed was cunning enough to learn all the tactics through which she could control May. Heed gets rid of Christine by sending her away to Maple Valley but May stays there at Cosey house. Heed recognized the fact that to celebrate the privileged position in the Cosey family something should be done to May. Hence, Heed makes every effort to declare May a lunatic and send her away from Cosey house. She did not succeed in her endeavour and May also proved to be harmless to Heed. After the death of Bill Cosey, she concentrated on how to acquire all the wealth. Nicole Moses believes that "Heed is ignorant, relies on manipulation and deceit to get by". Instead of making Cosey family peaceful habitat for May, Christine and herself, Heed wants to be alone "the queen" of Cosey castle. To execute this plan the only way was to keep May and Christine away from Cosey house.

Heed's obsession for the central position in Bill Cosey's life as well as Cosey family set her on the voyage of peace destruction in the Cosey family. She does not allow Bill Cosey to have good relation with his daughter-in-law and granddaughter. She also sets every member of Cosey family apart from other; May was not able to extend the mother-affection towards Christine and Christine also considers "May wasn't much of a mother to me" (184). So, Heed's role in the Cosey family was somewhat negative. In addition to that she was always scared of any change which would not turn in her favour and challenge her privileged position. The intensity of fear and tension makes Heed to hire a girl like Junior who could help her in executing her plan to grab all the wealth of Bill Cosey. She reveals her plans to find out some old menus, change the dates and other things on these menus and then present them as substantial documents to prove Heed as real inheritor of the Cosey property. The family rift is perpetuated by wealth. The fire of hatred among the Cosey family members refuses to be extinguished and, metaphorically, the will of mutual understanding has taken the way that goes away from Cosey house. The situation of Heed is pathetic. She loses Bill Cosey, her father's family is good-for-nothing and in addition to that "her parents were happy to be rid of her" (Raynon 39). She forges a deteriorated relation with May and Christine, making family resulted in the hollow vacuum of loneliness. So, Heed makes every attempt to become the proprietor of Cosey estate to comfort her traumatic psyche. Cosey house is bequeathed to her which offers her a sense of belonging not to the home but at least to a "house", a center to

which Heed's life revolves.

Heed in her old age is confined to her room on third floor with no one around. Heed's all unfulfilled desires related to family takes a nostalgic form and she starts to narrate her life story to Junior. Heed exhibits Junior the pictures of her marriage with Bill Cosey and explains many concerns. Morrison, through the nature of narrative, demonstrates that she has missed much of the family pleasure, certainly "he (Bill Cosey) was unfaithful to her with other women" (Vega-Gonzalez 282). Once Heed was married to Bill Cosey, she becomes aware of the circumstances around her, instantly, she seems to hold two intentions; one, to have occupying grip on Bill Cosey and, second, to remain herself unoccupied by May and Christine. So the Cosey family was a relationship of dominator and dominated where all the comforting touches remained absent. Jean Wyatt argues that "the traumatic rapture of Heed's childhood friendship with Christine which followed upon her marriage to Christine's grandfather disabled both the girls' ability to respond appropriately to the offerings of time (196)." Christine's position in Cosey house starts dwindling when her grandfather marries Heed, her playmate. Christine's friend who was eight months younger than her turns into her grandmother. Morrison makes all the relations in Cosey family very complex. Heed and Christine sometimes try to play together but the complexity of the relationship does not allow them. They remain indifferent to each other and their friendship turned in relation proves to be a burden, presence of one starts to disturb the other until Christine attempts to run away from Cosey house although her attempt fails and she again lands in Cosey family.

### **Christine's Symbolic Bedroom Exile**

May's instruction to Christine that she should leave her bedroom and shift to another room and Christine's subsequent attempt to run away from Cosey house persuades Bill Cosey to send her to Maple Valley. It was the first endeavor Christine was thrown away from Cosey family. It appears that she seizes to be a member of Cosey family, the most rich and an example in *Up Beech* but does not have a place for Christine. This first step of Bill Cosey which shows Christine the way out of Cosey family proves to be an initiation for many times thrown out and way. After completion of schooling at Maple Valley, she was perfectly trained in good manners. And she had also resolved that "everything would come off nicely, since her return began with a celebration celebrating everything: her birth day, graduation, the new house. She was determined to be civil to Heed, in control, but so nicely, the way they were taught at Maple Valley" (134). But the quarrel broke out between Heed and Christine when later started to point out grammatical mistakes of farmer. Heed being insulted at dining table was planning something different, something more serious against Christine, "some new way to rob her (Christine's) future just as she had ripped off her past" (24).

When May and Christine came back after the celebration party, they saw "smoke was blowing from her (Christine's) bedroom window" (134). Heed, getting angry on being insulted, sets Christine's bed on fire. Christine who had come back after more than four years, witness her bed being set on fire which signifies that there is no place for her in Cosey

family. Heed has given the signal of second exile from Cosey family and Bill Cosey declares the judgment that "Christine is to be packed off, sent away" (135). Everything starts to vanish from Christine's life, her family seems to set her on the way of self-destruction and "Christine feels totally banished from the presence of her family" (Mellard 708).

Thrown away from home Christine landed in Manila's whorehouse. Educated from Maple Valley, Christine had planned to get "secretarial work" (93). At Manila's whorehouse she was "claimed" by Ernie Holder. It would have been a good chance for Christine to settle her own family away from Cosey family because "it felt like a fate" (ibid) as she slipped in the life of Ernie Holder but "it was ridiculous" (ibid) as their marriage turned out. Christine sees Ernie in the arms of a staff sergeant's wife, she threw six bottles at him and "left him the next day" (162). Christine is every time being homeless when she straggles to set a home. After leaving Ernie Holder she calls May, but May is reluctant to let her come to Cosey house. Christine's journey proves to be endless and perpetual.

Christine is aware of the fact that joining Cosey house is not helpful in anyway. "The source of Christine's trauma is not the movement and its consequences, but Bill Cosey" (ROKOSZ-PIEJKO 81). She stays at Phillis Wheatley House. While working in a restaurant she kept looking for a husband, remained lonely and isolated. The only way to belong seems to find out a man who would not be like Bill Cosey or Ernie Holder. In these circumstances she meets Fruit, a revolutionary. The two seems to have perfect understanding. Christine spends nine years with Fruit. The relation between the two was less of lovers and more of comrades of an outfit. Instead of the six abortions, Christine had, she always remained unsentimental. Eventually all the dreams of ideal comradeship vanish when a comrade rapes a teenage volunteer and Fruit fails to take any action against him.

Another attempt to establish herself away from Cosey house comes in the form of Dr. Rio. But he proves to be a person who changes women as he changes other things in his life. Christine lives with him as a kept woman. She lives in his apartment, uses his car and other things but when Dr. Rio has done with Christine, she is first instructed to leave the apartment, then warned and finally thrown out of apartment with the order that not a single thing will leave the premises. She is allowed to take only her underwear and cosmetic bag. Dr. Rio seems to be an unfulfilled dream for Christine, uprooted from Dr. Rio's apartment she again lands in Manila's whorehouse where she decides to return to Cosey house with an excuse to take care of her mother. She had only once visited Cosey house to join the funeral of Bill Cosey even that event was not a peaceful. Heed and Christine were hardly stopped from grabbing each other. Now, after being thrown away from everywhere, after Heed is living alone at Cosey house, with fewer terms, they come to an agreement to live together in Cosey house.

### **Junior: an Instrument of Settlement**

Heed borrows a girl Junior who will contribute to prove Heed as real inheritor of Cosey property. Junior herself has a history of lifelong family trauma. "Junior's parents like the 'Breedloves' in the *Bluest Eye* fail to foster lasting emotional

ties” (Sathyaraj & Neelakantan 2006) <sup>[6]</sup>. Belonged to a slum, Junior wanted to grab every opportunity of going away from “the Settlement”. She is fourth child of her mother but first of her father. About her father she says that she had never seen him, desire was intense but the opportunities less to see him. Whenever she asked to her mother, she said “will you hush up”. Junior lived a life of alienation, bothered by her teenaged uncles, Junior once left Settlement. She “wondered for weeks without any attention being paid. Then suddenly noticed when she stole a G. I. Joe doll from an ‘Everything for a dollar’ store” (59). Junior was taken to custody when she refuses to give it back, and then “remanded to Correctional when she refused to provide any information other than her first name” (ibid).

Junior was despondent of her home in the Settlement so she preferred Correctional because “at home no one or anyone in charge, she felt like one of the Settlement dogs” (55). Correctional could not be a home yet a place to live. There was no “truck full of uncles” (58) who will crush her toes under the truck tires. Junior’s life away from home was peaceful. She used her wit to survive on road, to stay at Correctional was a welcome escape. Her mother was unconcerned about her and her father had disappeared, her uncles were a force that constantly threatened her.

Junior, “a girl craving for home” (116), completed her term at Correctional. She concerns great expectations to Exit Conference. She thought “a job offer would be discussed” (117). Unfortunately, when the Administrator tries to seduce her, during their straggle, the Administrator fell from one story. The authorities stayed Junior responsible for the event. In reality “killing the Administrator was not on her mind—stopping was” (116). “Junior, a young women in dire need of a place to call home” (Anonymous), with all these experiences of her own life, Junior enters Cosey family. Correctional had given her some “unacademic” education of hair dressing and stitching. All this was certainly needful for working with this old lady.

### The three women together

Morrison brings all the three women Heed, Christine and Junior under the same roof of Cosey house. All the three face same situation and all the three have straggled whole life with the problems pertaining to family life and all the three have experienced deprivation to its extreme. Junior enters Cosey house with only intension to find a place to live because it was her primary need. Christine had no place to go because she was living at Manila’s whorehouse without paying anything. Heed now suffering from arthritis unable to care herself. All the three are at the extreme ends of isolation. They have all their lives tried to belong to one or the other place but their attempt went in vain.

Cosey house, one time example in Up Beech, is now lost in the fog of strained family relationship. These Cosey women had closed the option of mutual living, one saw the other as an enemy so they could not emerge as good relatives. Heed and Christine could have lived with a good understanding if they would have not waited for the time to point out the mistakes of one another. Their attitude kept taking them away from each other. Now, when they have reached old age, there is no one around them. For making their places certain in Cosey

house, one borrows a girl and other a lawyer.

Now, the last encounter between Heed and Christine, after failing to have good family relation, occurs in the attic of the Cosey hotel. Heed has come along with Junior to find out some menus that could prove her the owner of Cosey property. Instead, Heed finds Christine present there. During the fight between the two, Heed fell from the attic through the stairs case. It is only at this instance that they recall their childhood friendship. From their conversation, it is clear that, near to them it is Bill Cosey who is responsible for all the strained relations in Cosey family. Whole her life Cosey family could not provide Christine the care which is usually available to the children of rich families.

Toni Morrison, through the symbol of Cosey family, has given us a specimen of lack of responsibility on the part of parents and grandparents. Morrison has also demonstrated its consequences on family members, especially on children, through the character of Christine. The lack of responsibility on the part of Bill Cosey and May make Christine confront all the bad situations from which every decent human generally and girls particularly will prefer to stay away. Christine accompanies Ernie Holder to Germany, follows Fruit, remains as kept woman of Dr. Rio and landed in Manila’s whorehouse. She confronts worst condition in her life and she was also exposed to most exploitative people who every time exploited her further.

### Conclusion

In the novel *Love*, Toni Morrison has given importance to a mutual understanding in a family relationship to avoid conflicts. The wealth of Cosey family could not save them from a confronting and strained situation which prevailed in their house. So, wealth is not enough in family life, Toni Morrison seems to argue. It has a certain role to play in the happiness of an individual but it is not soul sustainer of happiness rather it can cause fragmentation. Morrison views family “as a vital force that helps create socially sensitive and morally responsible citizenry” (Sathyaraj & Neelakantan 2006) <sup>[6]</sup>. *Love* is a complicated story, the kind of multi-themed, multi-layered, multi-generational novel Morrison is known for. In the book she pushes readers to the kinds of love people experience and how that *love* can destroy, she expounds on the nature of change and how it can both nourish and poison.

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