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A capstone project submitted for  
Graduation with University Honors

University Honors  
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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## Abstract

“I am a small woman. I don’t mean little; I mean small”: Understanding Black Women in  
Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

In Toni Morrison’s novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), the reader is given the opportunity for insight on the difficulties of being a Black woman in a sexist and racist patriarchal world. While the novel follows the journey of the lead male character, Milkman, it also gives life to all the females he encounters along the way. Morrison strategically writes *Song of Solomon* in layers to create an understanding of the stories of the female characters. She does this by writing the female characters to fit the negative stereotypes of Black women. In order to challenge and dismantle those negative images, Morrison doesn’t just write characters to fit stereotypes, she also writes them to defy those stereotypes and redefine themselves on their terms.

Literary scholars who have analyzed *Song of Solomon* say that Morrison is critiquing negative labels and stereotypes, which I agree with, but instead of breaking away from labeling Black women, some critiques tend to find alternative labels for Black women. For example, Jill Goad writes, “Morrison uses Ruth’s and Pilate’s relationships with men in their family, as well as their seemingly stereotypical characterizations to interrogate the broader stereotypes and cultural perceptions they represent,” but then goes on to label Ruth as “the stereotypical Oedipal mother” (39). Goad does not refute this label of Oedipal mother, and her argument thus contributes to the idea that Black women can be labeled in order to understand their complexities. This action ultimately undermines Morrison’s resistance to labels.

When considering the importance of female characters in the novel, a few scholars imply that the female characters are present in relation to Milkman only and are sacrificial or one-dimensional.<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as Soophia Ahmad have contributed to the idea that the Black

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<sup>1</sup> Additional scholars whose arguments follow this pattern include: Frank H. Seodial, Parvin Ghasemi, and Catherine Ruth Schetina.

female characters in the novel are one dimensional because their essays focus on characteristics that can be perceived negatively without positivity to counter-act it. Such scholars tend to miss the element of resistance. Ahmad, for instance, refers to Ruth as having a “pathetic existence” but this idea of Ruth is overly simplistic, and carries a harsh negative judgment that fails to account for Ruth’s courageous negotiation of oppressive circumstances (60). Ultimately, Ahmad is contributing to a negative image that is inappropriately placed on Black women.

There has been a lot of critical analysis on women in *Song of Solomon*, yet even when the research attends to Black women within the text, it tends to omit female characters, except for Pilate Ruth, and Hagar.<sup>2</sup> Other females in the novel are not represented in the research sufficiently.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, my essay focuses on rehabilitating unjustly maligned female characters (Ruth) and arguing for the importance of the forgotten Black women in the novel (Circe, the Dead Sisters). All the ladies I will be focusing on are forgotten and are unseen for who they are figuratively and physically.

Under the constant controlling and watchful eye of white patriarchal society, Black women are subjected to constant forms of oppression to this very day. The systematic racial and sexist social issues that Morrison resists have their roots in the history of African American oppression under slavery and continue to have a negative effect on Black women. As bell hooks says in *Ain't I A Woman*,

Many of the anti-black woman stereotypes originated during slavery. ... To explain the black female’s ability to survive without the direct aid of a male . . . white males argued

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<sup>2</sup> For additional analysis, see Malin LaVon Walther, Sherine Upot,, and K. Qasim.

<sup>3</sup> When I did find research by Judith Fletcher on a supposed minor character it focused on Milkman and Greek mythology predetermining Circe’s role in the novel. Soophia Ahmad addresses Corinthian’s role in the novel.

that black slave women were not ‘real’ women but were masculinized sub-human creatures. (hooks 71)

This mindset has caused trouble for Black women in society and has contributed to, Systematic devaluation of black womanhood [which] led to a downgrading of any activity black women did. ... They [white hierarchy] labeled hard-working, self-sacrificing black women who were concerned with creating a loving, supportive environment for their families Aunt Jemimas, Sapphires, Amazons—all negative images that were based upon sexist stereotypes of womanhood. (hooks 70)

Morrison challenges these systematic stereotypes because they attempt to hold back Black women and devalue them. These stereotypes also remove individuality from Black women and cause them to be grouped as if each Black woman is not her own person. Importantly, these stereotypes belittle the complexities of Black women. It is imperative to address and demystify white patriarchal stereotypes of Black women because that is the only way the complexities of Black women can be understood and respected. Morrison helps to bring awareness to the importance of understanding Black women by writing the female characters as stereotypes and writing resistance in them at the same time. This duality reveals Black women’s multifariousness, and that they are not objects to be categorized and labeled. As the talented and socially conscious singer and songwriter Janelle Monae says, “Categorize me, I defy every label,” and this what Morrison reveals in her novels.

Morrison writes the female characters in *Song of Solomon* to be resistant to systematic racial and gendered oppression. She does this in part by calling attention to the collusion between stereotypical ideas about Black female subjectivity and patriarchal organizations of domestic space. Domestic environments, in the novel, allow for revealing how Black women do not let

stereotypes define them. While it may appear that Morrison is caging in the female characters, she is actually freeing them on their terms. The women I will be writing about—Ruth, Lena, Corinthians, and Circe—are prime examples of women who find their own freedom while trapped in a domestic sphere. These women also illuminate the connection between the patriarchal domestic, gendered oppression, and the idea of women as property.

I am writing this paper to bring awareness to the fact that Black women should not and cannot be labeled because they are the backbone to communities, families, and society, while they each uniquely fight oppression and hold on to their own desires. But ultimately, Black women are human. Black women are ladies. Black women are what they desire to be. Morrison's writing calls for the freedom of Black women from stereotypes, labels, and the systems of power that hold such preconceived categories in place. This essay will explain and show how Black women navigate their oppressed home life and public life in *Song of Solomon*, while maintaining their own self-definition.

### **Section 1: Covertness in the character Ruth**

The character Ruth is the mother of the lead male character of the novel and is perceived as hopeless and, as the men call her, a “doe” (Morrison 85). She is in an abusive relationship with her husband and often shunned by the community because of her social status. Throughout the novel, Morrison seems to superficially imply, that Ruth's is a minor role. However, in these same moments, Morrison creates space for Ruth to shine as a strong and smart individual.

Critic Soophia Ahmad argues that Ruth doesn't get along with the Black or white women in her town because of gender and race, implying that Ruth doesn't have a female support group.<sup>4</sup> She appears to be disconnected from the public community because she does not help the tenants

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<sup>4</sup> Soophia Ahmad (3).

of Macon's property. Understanding this through the lenses of a system that continuously oppresses Black women, however, may help us to see that Ruth is being blamed for not supporting the Black community in a situation where she has no control. There is no way she could have stopped Macon from evicting people, and the blame shouldn't be placed on her. This inappropriate blame has caused Ruth to be misunderstood and her truth to be hidden, which happens to Black women often. Like all Black women, Ruth carries the burdens of others without recognition.

Ruth's appearance is a cover story for her truth and understanding as a Black woman. As Wahneema Lubiano describes, "Cover stories cover or mask what they make invisible with an alternative presence; a presence that redirects our attention, that covers or makes absent what has to remain unseen if the *seen* is to function" (324). This idea of the seen needing to cover the unseen to function explains why Black women's complexity is consistently labeled. The label provides a distraction from who Black women really are and all they can do, in an effort for a white and male-dominated society to prosper without acknowledgment or understanding of Black women, who are at the root of all things.

#### Cover Story 1: Ruth's Social Isolation

Ruth's isolation from the public community appears to make her alone but in actuality, she has a small Black female community. Ruth is seen as a bourgeois figure because of the isolation she experiences, but this title covers Ruth's truth. Ruth overcomes the difficulties imposed by society by forming a small community with her daughters, and Pilate. The existence of this community shows that Ruth is not "uppity," because she is able to support and rely on other Black women. In this community, her voice is heard, where it is often silenced elsewhere in the novel. Morrison's writing around Ruth and the community reveals the resilience that Ruth

has to defy the odds. When Ruth comments on Macon's driving, he responds rudely saying, "If you say one more thing to me about the way I drive, you're going to walk back home. I mean it," at which her daughter, "Lena sat forward and put her hand on her mother's shoulder" (Morrison 34). This moment reveals the support that Ruth gets from her small but powerful community. This small gesture of Lena's lets Ruth know she isn't alone although she may appear to be. Positive attributes of Black women, like this moment of bonding and strength, are covered by negative stereotypes and labels imposed by a white and patriarchal society.

Unwarranted difficulties are in place to avoid and continue the misunderstanding of Black women, thus making it hard to see or even understand Ruth's small community and how she survives in a space of oppression. By having this community, she is resisting the image of her as a hopeless woman and uncovering the support that she gains from, and gives to, other Black women. The kindness Lena shows her amidst Macon's anger at this moment allows for an uncovering of what Black women's complexities look like. Lena's gesture reveals hidden complexities because it opposes what is happening in the car ride currently and the negative energy that Macon creates.

Ruth's small community also reveals her desires for herself. Midway through the novel, Ruth says that Pilate "had brought her son to life in the first place" through the use of a "nasty greenish-gray powder Pilate had given her to be stirred into rainwater and put into food" (Morrison 130). The support Pilate gives Ruth at this moment reveals the bond between them even though they don't see one another often. This bond is important when it comes to understanding Ruth because it shows that she is not only concerned with materialistic things but that she needs love and affection.

Ruth's desire for affection rubs against the grain of her supposedly bourgeois subjectivity, showing that not all materialistic things are important to Ruth. The closeness that she gets from things that belonged to people she loves is what is important. Of the objects in the house that used to belong to her father, Ruth says that "it was important for me to be in his presence, among his things" because she loved her father and wanted to be near the one person whose love never wavered (Morrison 124).

The depth of Ruth's desires is revealed in Morrison's writing of Ruth domestic setting. This is where we also see her break out of the bourgeois stereotype because property as an object to possess is not of importance to her. For example, her living in her father's house, which is now hers, is enough to make her content. Living where her father lived allowed her to be close to him; the property itself didn't matter. She is not concerned with monetary value but rather concerned with her bonds to the people she loves. While the novel makes it appear that she is not concerned with people, careful attention to detail reveals that she actually is, and she yearns for human interaction. Her desire for affection makes her vulnerable to Macon's desire for property. This ultimately explains why Morrison writes ownership around the house to seem to belong to Macon. However, Ruth is so attached to the house that when Macon takes ownership of it, he also takes ownership of her. This idea is reinforced through the dynamics of Macon and Ruth's relationship.

### Cover Story 2: Ruth's Submissiveness

Ruth is a strong Black woman. However, the concept of strength can be vexed for Black women because it can overshadow all other aspects of Black female personhood. To call a Black woman strong is not wrong; it is wrong when that is all she is seen as. According to Patricia Hills Collins, "Abused women, particularly those bearing the invisible scars of emotional abuse, are

often silenced by the image of the ‘superstrong’ Black woman” (159). However, Ruth’s situation is a little different because scholars do not give her the title of “Strong Black woman.” Although she is strong and surviving abuse, she is silenced. Ruth experiences emotional and physical abuse from her husband Macon on the regular. Her home is referred to as “more prison than palace” (Morrison 9), and the narrator conveys that “Macon would either lash out at her [Ruth] verbally or hit her” (Morrison 66). This type of oppressive environment is where Ruth spends most of her days, but she does not let that stop her from living.

Uncovering more of the character Ruth, one can see that she does find subtle ways to resist the imposed role of a servant. A prime example of Ruth’s resistance is her will to live. Morrison writes that "Ruth looked for the watermark several times during the day. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. . . That this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside. . ." (16). This moment in the novel reveals that although Ruth is subjected to a life like a prisoner, she breaks through and holds onto a piece of herself. She uses this watermark, which developed prior to her relationship with Macon, to be her anchor. To have life within, although she may not show it, is a way to express that she has never given up on herself. Ruth draws strength from the past and from moments that she controls to stay alive, like the fresh flowers she puts in the vase. This watermark uncovers Ruth's self-love that she continues to hold onto. Ruth is aware of what type of love she needs for herself, and while she is not the first to speak up, she does when she deems necessary.

We see Ruth show resistance to patriarchal control and reveal her inner strength and determination when Macon attempts to get her to abort Macon Jr. During Ruth’s pregnancy, her husband Macon, made her, “drink castor oil”, “sit on a hot pot”, use a “soapy enema,” and insert a “knitting needle” (Morrison 130) all in an effort to cause her to have a miscarriage. When none

of these things worked, because Ruth did not execute them correctly on purpose, he then “punched her stomach” (Morrison 131). This was the last straw for Ruth. Ruth’s ability to withstand the abuse from Macon gives the reader a glimpse into Ruth’s strength and resistance to the label of submission. But when Ruth goes to Pilate for protection, we see Ruth boldest stand against Macon, because she fully takes back her control by seeing her pregnancy through. Morrison writes this scene in a manner that allows Black women to have a voice in the novel and the final say on what to do with their bodies. Through these actions, Ruth rejects the idea of a man controlling her body like property and reveals the power that women collectively possess. Ruth deserves to be recognized as a strong Black woman, because of the ways in which she resists oppression, but a strong Black woman is not all that she is. Consistently falling into the role of the subservient wife and mother makes her appear to be those titles and nothing more. The given and lack of titles reveal that Black women carry multiple identities and one does not overtake another. Therefore, they never fit into a label, while also overcoming labels.

### Cover Story 3: Ruth’s Motherhood

Ruth’s most recognized role in the novel is a mother but she is criticized because of it.<sup>5</sup> Ruth puts a lot into being a Black mother because she loves her children, and because Black motherhood is “a respected and important part of Black civil society” (Collins 161). Simultaneously, Black motherhood is often challenged because people have trouble understanding all the dynamics involved in Black maternity. Morrison writes Ruth’s mothering intentions in multiple layers that show her finding fulfillment in being needed but also following tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> The following scholars negatively critique Ruth’s mothering and tries to label her instead of being sympathetic to her and allowing her words and actions to speak positively about herself: Anna Hinton, Jill Goad, and Sherine Upot.

Perhaps the most divisive issue for scholars critical of Ruth's mothering is Ruth's decision to nurse Macon Jr. past infancy. Ruth shouldn't have to explain her nursing of Milkman; however, the nursing scene implies that an explanation is required. Due to the lack of affection Ruth receives, she is often seeking it. Collins writes, "despite the importance of this choice [motherhood], for many, it can substitute for lack of steady, sexualized love relationships in their lives" (161). This does not imply an inappropriate relationship between parent and child but rather that the parent directs all their attention to their child as a form of distraction and replacement for the missing intimacy in their life. We see this play out in Ruth's nursing scene early in the novel.

Freddie the janitor is looking into the Dead's house and sees Ruth nursing Milkman when he is of an age that is not socially accepted for nursing. When Ruth sees him spying on her, Freddie "interpreted her [Ruth] look as simple shame" because, in his mind and most of the society's, her behavior is inappropriate (Morrison 14). Looking through the lenses of society, what Ruth is doing has an unacceptable alternative motive, and the way Macon speaks about Ruth contributes to this image of her. This judgment of Ruth reveals that Black mother's experiences are always under scrutiny. It does not matter if what the parent is doing is right or wrong, good or bad, it will be seen in a negative manner if white society hasn't approved it and Black society hasn't accepted it.

There was nothing wrong with Ruth nursing Milkman. In fact, even Freddie acknowledges this when he says, "a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South. Lot of 'em" (Morrison 13-14). This comment reveals that Ruth was carrying out tradition in Black maternal culture, yet she is shamed for her parenting and said to be inappropriate. Freddie's response implies that traditional parenting "rules" do not apply to Ruth, essentially saying, they

don't apply to any Black women. This, shows the inequality that Black women face. The idea of Ruth being inappropriate is incorrect. Morrison purposefully writes two types of responses in the nursing scene to show how drastically different they are and how outside opinion tries to control what Black women do with their bodies. The way in which Ruth describes her feelings around nursing as, "the impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. . . as though she was a cauldron issuing spinning gold" (Morrison 13). This description reveals that she felt like a provider for her son, producing something for him that no one else could. The pleasure she got from nursing Milkman was the feeling of being needed, "a pleasure she hated to give up" (Morrison13), which is why she kept it secret as long as possible.

What pleased Ruth in the action of nursing was selfish and selfless at the same time. Ruth was claiming something for herself in the space of motherhood. As a mother one can find joy in the helping of one's children without being inappropriate, and in order to understand Black motherhood one must first understand the duality of selfishness and selflessness within the role of being a Black mother. By this I mean that everything done by a mother is not just for the kid. This pleasure that Ruth experiences uncovers Ruth fluidness in the role of a Black mother. Therefore, the actual feeling of "terror that sprang to Ruth's eyes came from the quick realization that she was to lose fully half of what made her daily life bearable" (Morrison 13). Ruth is realizing that she is about to lose some of the only meaningful human interaction she gets, and she is losing her son at the same time.

Motherhood has no set definition for Black women. Collins teaches us that "motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment" (176). Morrison writes this behavior into Ruth

and through motherhood. Ruth finds room in the world for herself and teaches her daughters self-definition. The way Ruth can navigate being a mother shows her strength, independence, and multiplicity as a Black woman. Ruth is a prime example of why Black women cannot be labeled and forced to fit under a single title; she is more than just one characteristic. Her story gives insight to how Black women manage to survive, take care of others, and still love themselves.

## **Section 2: Black Women as Property**

The Dead daughters in *Song of Solomon* show exploratory strength and individualism, yet far too often they are left of scholarly research.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the Dead daughters is important because they help us to understand the reason for some of the actions of Black women. They also give insight to Black motherhood and reveal how motherhood looks different for every woman. While the daughters' behavior represents their mother's parenting, it also exposes complexities that the daughters deal with individually and together. Ruth's daughters, Magdalena called Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead, display community and self-definition that they have learned from their mother and found within themselves. Through Ruth's mistakes and life choices, she has taught her daughters how to put themselves first but still defend their Black women's community. The Dead daughters have grown into their own women but their lives in *Song of Solomon* are still examples of struggles that Black women deal with pertaining to patriarchal notions of property.

Corinthians and Lena Dead have been viewed as property since they were children. Morrison writes a powerful scene when Corinthians and Lena go to the icehouse with their

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<sup>6</sup> Most of the scholarly work on the text does not focus on the Dead sisters; Soophia Ahamd is the only scholarly work that has a section on Corinthians. No one has spoken on Lena's character.

father. This scene reveals that even when amongst loved ones, Black females aren't always safe. The devaluing of young Black girls has a lasting effect on them. Lena recalls the day:

He [Macon] took us to the icehouse once. Drove us there in his Hudson. . . . There were other children there. Barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty. But we stood apart, near the car, in white stockings, ribbons, and gloves. And when he talked to the men, he kept glancing at us, us and the car. The car and us. You [Milkman] see, he took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him. Then one of the little boys came over to us and put his hand on Corinthian's hair. She offered him her piece of ice and before we knew it, he was running toward us. He knocked the ice out of her hand into the dirt and shoved us both into the car. First he displayed us, then splayed us. (216)

At first glance it may seem as though Macon is proud of his daughters but actually, they are just displayable objects for him to show off. Macon is purposefully objectifying his daughters to brag about his lifestyle. I say this for a few reasons. One rather obvious reason is because Lena says, "he displayed us" and "he took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him." The shift from us to him reveals Lena's gradual understanding that this scene had nothing to do with them and everything to do with her father's representation. At a young age she was realizing that she was being objectified and was humiliated.

Secondly, we can see objectification through the way the Dead girls are dressed. Morrison makes it very clear that the girls are dressed in a more upscale manner than the other children by using the terms "dirty" in contrast to "white stockings." She also makes it clear that the girls didn't like to be dressed this way. Early in the novel she writes that, "they slipped off their patent leather pumps, [and] rolled their stockings" when they are out of view of their parents, inferring that these clothes were not satisfying to them (Morrison 31). So, Macon having

the girls dressed in this manner, knowing he was going to a place of casual attire, reveals that he had always had in mind to show off his daughters. Macon's actions disregard his daughters as individuals because, he is doing nothing for them; his actions are selfish. This is a longstanding pattern of Macon's treatment of his daughters, which has a lasting effect on how his daughters view themselves in the public eye and how they feel towards him. We see this with the quietness of Lena and the naïve behavior of Corinthians. The girls did nothing wrong this day and yet they are treated and made to feel as if they have.

Macon's disregard of who his daughters are is continued through the family's departure from the icehouse. Macon's abrupt removal of his daughters from the icehouse reveals a sense of hierarchy that Macon is trying to create. Morrison uses the terms "running," "shoved," and the phrase "before we knew it" to express the urgency that Macon was feeling to stop his daughters from interacting with the perceived dirty kids, completely ignoring that Corinthians wanted to interact with the children, which is why she offered her ice to them. Macon's urgency doesn't come from his desire to protect his children but rather from a desire to keep his "objects" perfect. The objectification that the Dead girls experience here causes them to grow up too soon.

It is common for Black females to be considered socially older than other children their age, but this is not something that Black females desire; it is something that has been ascribed to them since slavery. This icehouse scene is an overall representation of Corinthian and Lena having to be more emotionally mature than they should have to be. The Dead girls are unwillingly acquiring responsibility for their father's emotional well-being at the cost of their own. Black women often bear the burden of carrying everyone else's problems and being blamed for wrongdoing they have no control over. Although the Dead girls are children during this memory and are expected to listen to their father, through their father's action they also realize

“that they must subordinate their needs to those of Black men in order to help Black men regain and retain their manhood” (Collins 183). They must also sacrifice their emotional well-being for their physical survival (Collins 183). In this brief moment Corinthian and Lena’s life changed forever. At this moment they realize that they are taking on a Black female complexity of being expected to be the support of someone regardless of what it may cost them.

This teaches us that even when Black women are supposedly being treated better than others, as precious commodities, it oppresses them more. This happens because they are objectified and not seen for who they are. In this case the sisters are seen for their class but not themselves: they can be used to show their fathers wealth, a wealth that means nothing to them. All they really wanted was to be normal kids who could play with any other kids. Again, their actual desires were overshadowed by a man’s priorities. Men like Macon continue to contribute to the injustices that Black women face because of their privilege as men, especially if they have money.

Similar to Macon, Milkman feels entitled to act on the behalf of women in the Dead house without their consent. This dominating behavior reinforces the idea that the Dead women are property to men and ultimately leads to a fallout between Milkman and Lena. It is important to look at the Dead sisters “journey toward an understanding of how our [Black women’s] personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (Collins 114). Black women are looked at for their actions but not what has caused these actions at all and especially not in a positive manner. Magdalena called Lena confronting Milkman for poor patriarchal behavior could be received in terms of the stereotype of the angry Black women, which is how Milkman receives it. But if we look into why Lena felt the need to confront Milkman then we can begin to understand how intersecting oppression has a

played a part of her and her family's everyday life. Lena tells the reader and Milkman that, "there are all kinds of ways to pee on people," and that Milkman has been doing it all his life (Morrison 213). This is significant because it confirms the fact that she has had to deal with oppression from her brother, and she goes on to list some of the oppression felt by all the women in the house: "When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything stopped for you. . ." (Morrison 215). This reveals a buildup of things that has caused Lena to feel as she does about Milkman. Her confrontation with Milkman was long overdue and needed to happen. But where did Lena get the strength and courage to call out patriarchal power?

This journey first starts with Black motherhood, because Black mothers are the first ones to begin to teach understanding and navigating intersecting oppressions to their daughters. Through watching her mother's journey in life, Lena has learned the importance of taking back ownership of herself through verbal and non-verbal behavior. Collins tells us that "Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (102). We see this type of developed empowerment in Lena because of her experience as a young Black woman being raised by a Black woman. In mundane moments, like a car ride, Ruth gives Lena an example of how to stay empowered when Ruth "reasserted herself into the conversation" that she was rudely removed from (Morrison 33). Lena watches this happen and learns through Ruth's subtle push back that Black women's voices matter and that we have to make them heard. Lena's access to a Black female community has helped her build strength; her relationship with other Black women has taught her the need to protect and defend not only herself, but the other Black women in her community. When Macon

has “forbidden her [Corinthians] to leave the house, [and] made her quit her job,” Lena tells Milkman that “it is all because of you” (Morrison 215). Lena thus makes it clear that by reporting to Macon that his sister was dating Porter, Milkman participates in the patriarchal control that is always surrounding the Dead Sisters and constraining their lives. Milkman’s role in the separation of Corinthians and Porter was the last straw for Lena. This moment thus helps the reader to see how Lena’s life has led her to actively protect her Black female community and vocally correct Milkman on his patriarchal power.

Lena is needed as a protector and defender in the Dead house, but her strong rebuke to Milkman also seems unexpected. Throughout the novel there isn’t much drama that surfaces from the women in the house. They seem to be quiet and still, but there is a fight that swirls around inside of them. It becomes obvious that Lena is the Dead ladies’ protector when she says to Milkman, “since when did you care whether Corinthians stood or fell down? You’ve been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us. . . . I didn’t go to college because of him [Macon Sr.]. Because I was afraid of what he might do to Mama” (Morrison 216-217). These comments of Lena’s show us that she has been listening and keeping track of all the wrong done to the females in her family by men, and she is ready to end intersecting oppression in her house, starting with her brother. Although she no longer wants to kill Milkman, she wants to be sure that he doesn’t hurt the women in her family anymore. This is made clear in the novel when Lena tells Milkman, “I don’t make roses anymore, and you have pissed your last in this house” (Morrison 218). What Lena is saying in this moment is that she will no longer be quiet, and that Milkman better recognize that the Dead women are not disposable or to be toyed with. In addition to Lena fighting intersecting oppression head on, we learn how important and valued this conversation is because Morrison makes it clear when she

writes Lena to say, “I was the one who started making artificial roses. . . . I loved to do it. It kept me. . . quiet” (214). This implies that a purposefully quiet woman chooses to speak to someone who had “not said more than four consecutive sentences since he was in the ninth grade” (Morrison 211).

Lena’s break in silence evidences the need and responsibility that Lena feels to protect the women she holds dear. Lena as protector and voice for the Dead women is important because the, “issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women’s lives” (Collins 103). Black women should have a voice in any atmosphere, and finding space for their voice shouldn’t be an obstacle that they have to fight. However, Lena has taken on this responsibility for the women in her family. Lena, a typically quiet woman, finding the will power to fight Black female complexities with her voice shows how necessary it is to fight intersecting oppression. She is getting out of her comfort zone in an effort to help her Black female community. Lena is an example of what fighting Black female oppression looks like, and her sister First Corinthians is an example of Black female oppressive experiences.

Through Corinthians day-to-day actions, one can see that she is consistently thinking about what bystanders may think, because she is fully aware of the stereotypes that Black women deal with. From her actions on the public bus and behavior at work, to the way she conceals herself in her romantic relationship, Corinthians is attempting to protect her image in the public. We don’t see covertness in Morrison’s writing style for First Corinthian’s experiences, but her experience is important to speak about because it continues to show how many different complexities Black women battle. However, just because stereotyped imagery is a part of Black women lives doesn’t mean they have to accept projected images. “When Black women define

ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so” (Collins 114). This clear rejection is seen in everything First Corinthians does.

Morrison writes that “those whom she [Corinthians] saw regularly on the bus assumed that she had some higher household position than theirs since she came to work in high heeled shoes,” but First Corinthians “was careful; she carried no shopping bag of shoes, aprons, or uniforms. Instead she had a book” (189). While this scene could be interpreted as Corinthians maintaining the image her father has set for her, I believe this scene illuminates the extra steps Corinthians takes to maintain her self-definition of self-worth, because she made the choice to work when she didn’t have to. She is controlling what she is doing with her life. Through these actions she determines what her image will be, thus removing the possibilities of others determining anything other than what she wants. This sort of protection of image is also seen around Corinthian’s choice to require her boyfriend, Porter, to drop her off at the bus stop so she could “walk home the way she normally would” (Morrison 195). This choice protects her image and her relationship, not just from judgement but also from control. Through her protective behavior, she also resisted “physical markers [that] reinforced the deference relationship. . . . [such as] domestics wearing uniforms” (Collins 57). Corinthians was doing it all: protecting her image and fighting against racial discrimination just by loving herself. It is a shame that while Black women love themselves, they also have to fight oppression and control from a patriarchal society. In Corinthians case, she has to fight a patriarchal mindset from her father and brother also.

While First Corinthians works hard to protect her image, her job requires her to live a double life. At work Corinthians, “never let her mistress know she had ever been to college or

Europe or could recognize one word of French that Miss Frahm had not taught her” (Morrison 190). She does this because in order to keep this job she must not appear to be smarter than her employer. Ever since slavery the need to show hierarchy was common behavior. Collins tells us that when it came to Black women working for white people “deference mattered, and those women who were submissive or who successfully played the role of obedient servant were more highly valued by their employers, regardless of the quality of the work performed” (56). This racial oppression is what Corinthians had to deal with every day, but did so because of “the genuine lift which came of having her own money rather than receiving an allowance like a child” (Morrison 190). Leading a double life at work was worth it to Corinthians because it allowed her to maintain her own self-definition.

### **Section 3: Black Women’s Protection**

Black women protecting themselves from “the prying eyes of dominant groups” is common behavior in *Song of Solomon*; it allows them to continue “hiding [their] self-defined standpoint” of self-worth, while resisting the idea of them as property (Collins 97). Historian Ashley Farmer says that, “black women’s lives and labors have filled bookshelves by ‘mining the forgotten’ to render them visible” (1). What this means is that through what is forgotten in history about Black women is where Black women’s true identity lies. This is what Morrison requires of her readers. We must see what is not present to begin to understand Black women.

Circe is spoken of in memory vaguely through the novel. When she is mentioned, she is recognized for her motherly role in town. When Milkman visits Danville he asks for Circe, but it is said that she is dead and that she formerly lived on the Butler property (Morrison 233). When Milkman arrives at the Butlers, he discovers that Circe is in fact “alive, and taking care of the dogs” from her past boss (334). Circe being assumed dead by townspeople but actually being

alive reveals how she was used and then forgotten not just by the Butlers but by her own Black community. Circe responds to the idea of being dead by saying, “Splendid, I don’t like those Negroes in town,” because she is tired of being used and undervalued (245). Her remark also illuminates her choice to stay isolated rather than being subjected to the townspeople and their thoughts and opinions of her as a Black woman. This choice may seem out of the norm, but it makes total sense when we think about how Black women can be hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. Circe chooses to live alone and isolated from townspeople for her self-preservation; it is how she stayed in control of her own life after being controlled for years. Circe was dealing with how her life had turned out and wanted to care for herself; she didn’t want to be anyone’s property ever again.

Morrison writes Circe to fit the label of Mammy, while destroying it at the same time. The reader learns from her narrative that in the previous generation, Circe hid Macon and Pilate in the house that she works in knowing they were not welcome (Morrison 166). Circe assumed responsibility and put the Black children she loved before the job; this is the opposite of what a Mammy would do. Morrison writes Circe to put up a façade that appeases the white hierarchy but doesn’t expose the truth. Circe’s actions are an act of resistance against labels and ownership of her Black body.

Circe continues to show resistance to white hegemony and the label Mammy by treating the Butler’s house in the opposite manner to what they wanted and letting it break down. Circe’s actions around the Butler’s house is confronting the title Mammy because it shows that she is not loyal to the Butlers. Circe finds revenge and freedom by treating the Butler house the way she felt treated: ignored, used, and disposable. She says that “They loved it. Stole for it, lied for it, killed for it” but she would “never clean it again . . . everything in this world they lived for will

crumble and rot” (Morrison 247). This shows that she never accepted the title of Mammy or being viewed and used as someone’s property, because she didn’t care for their things the way you do for a loved one. Circe is publicly reclaiming herself.

Overall, Morrison write each female character to be more than they appear. Each Black female in *Song of Solomon* are more significant than a minor role and they are created to bring awareness about sexist, gender, and racial stereotypes about Black women. The women each fight a different issue that helps to free them from patriarchal ownership. All Black women unrightfully have to deal with intersecting oppression, but they all fight it. Some speak up loud like Lena, some are more subtle like Ruth, and some are secretive like Corinthians, but they all fight for themselves and each other. Regardless of how Black women choose to fight oppression, it is important to recognize that Black women deal with unjust issues in complex ways. Labeling Black women is another form of ownership and categorizing the Black female body. Morrison truly reveals the duality of how a Black woman can seem to fit a stereotype but also defy it. Ultimately, she shows that labeling and categorizing Black women doesn’t work. Black women are everywhere and a part of everything; there is nothing that can define them. As Janelle Monae says, “I’m the random minor note you hear in every song.”

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