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# Women's Relationships: Female Friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Love, Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

Kadidia Sy

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WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS: FEMALE FRIENDSHIP IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND  
*LOVE*, MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND SEFI ATTA'S *EVERYTHING GOOD*

*WILL COME*

by

KADIDIA SY

Under the Direction of Renée Schatteman, Chris Kocela and Margaret Harper

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes female friendship in four novels written by black diasporic women and examines the impact of race, class and gender on women's relationships. The novels emphasize how women face the challenges of patriarchal institutions and other attempts to subjugate them through polygamy, neo-colonialism, constraints of tradition, caste prejudice, political instability and the Biafra war. This dissertation uses characterization and plot analysis to explore the different stories and messages the novels portray. As findings this study foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome prejudice and survive, to enjoy female empowerment, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building. However, another conclusion focuses on the power of patriarchy which constitutes a threat to female bonding and usually causes women's estrangement.

INDEX WORDS: Women's relationships, Female friendship, Female bonding,  
Sisterhood, Female solidarity, Female Empowerment

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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May 2008

## DEDICATION

To the memory of my dear father, HAMADEL SY, who made this project possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the issue of female friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Love*, in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. I have chosen four novels written by women from the black diaspora<sup>1</sup> in order to analyze how the specific experiences they describe intersect with ways in which black women make and keep friends. Black women's common experience of oppression urges them to form bonds in order to fight back the impact of race, class and gender. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy<sup>2</sup> but it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing. Although all four novels acknowledge the importance of female friendship, Morrison deliberately chooses to portray failed relationships in order to emphasize the power of patriarchy and warn women about the danger a lack of bonding is likely to cause in their lives, whereas Bâ and Atta present in their books forms of nurturing sisterhood, that is, a friendship based on sincere commitment. Each novel presents female friendship according to the social and cultural realities of its particular environment. Morrison shows the impact of patriarchal structures like race, class and even marriage on female bonding and what it means to be black and woman. Sula Peace and Nel Wright in *Sula* and Heed The Knight Johnson and Christine Cosey in *Love* form bonds in their girlhood that allow them to nurture each other and soothe the pain of patriarchal oppression. Bâ emphasizes how female friendship helps women face polygamy,<sup>3</sup> the impact of colonialism and patriarchy in general, whereas Atta foregrounds the way female bonding saves women from sexism, domestic violence and political instability. Both Bâ and Atta present female friendship as a form of empowerment that helps women build new identities and survive their

misfortunes. This form of sisterhood usually extends to female solidarity, which involves more women who benefit from this care and nurturing. Although female friendship heals wounds resulting from prejudice and secures women's survival, it faces various challenges that threaten its accomplishments. Besides patriarchal structures, problems traceable to self-centeredness, failure to handle differences between women and lack of sincere commitment threaten the stability of female friendship.

Female bonding draws the attention of some theorists who analyze and examine women's relationships and the different challenges facing them. Cleonora Hudson-Weems, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Carole Boyce Davies, Elizabeth Abel and Obioma Nnameka study women's identities and relationships and their impact in the community. They analyze women's experiences related to race, class and gender, and how women develop strategies that allow them to survive. They foreground how black women connect in order not only to heal the pain resulting from these misfortunes but also to provide themselves with comfort and security. Abel reflects,

In developing a theory of female friendship, I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the *survival* of women as well as those that maintain the *subordination* of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been *for our Selves and each other*. (434 Emphasis in original)

Abel raises an important point concerning the need to highlight the struggles of women to be out of reach of oppression, secure their own survival and fight their subjugation by patriarchal structures. Bonnie Thornton Dill state, "The experiences of racial oppression made Black women

strongly aware of their group identity and consequently more suspicious of women who, initially at least, defined much of their feminism in personal and individualistic terms” (279). In other words, the foundation of these identities explains the different standpoints that women from different cultural backgrounds have about feminism. Writing about black women, Hudson-Weems points out that “Their bonding renders one sure way of bringing about ultimate success, for the sharing of one’s life experiences often gives what is needed for that success. Hence, where there is a coming together of body, mind, and spirit, there is victory” (*Africana Womanism* 67). The mutual support and sharing provide an opportunity to learn, grow and take advantage of the exchange. Learning not only from one’s mistakes but from other women’s as well presents a real chance of success.

Like Abel, Hudson-Weems also studies sisterhood and considers it to be one of the characteristics of Africana womanism,<sup>4</sup> a concept she theorizes and prefers to the term *feminism* in the sense that it involves realities concerning women of African descent, reflecting their entanglement in racial, class and gender systems. She sees *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on Africana womanism mainly because of the novel’s focus on female friendship. Of the protagonist, she insists, “Ramatoulaye embodies many characteristics of the true Africana womanist, the most obvious ones being genuine in sisterhood, strong, self-defined, demanding of respect, family centered, male compatible, authentic, whole, mothering, and nurturing” (*Africana Womanism* 96-7). Hudson-Weems considers the friendship at the core of the novel, between the characters Ramatoulaye and Aissatou - to be a prototype of female solidarity and an example to be followed by Africana women. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent the true nature of female solidarity in the sense that they strive to cultivate and nurture a sisterhood that allows them to care for one another as well as provide and render moral and material support. Each helps the

other in difficult times and encourages her to make positive changes that allow her to face the challenges of polygamy and patriarchy in general. Because they go through similar experiences, they understand and empathize<sup>5</sup> with each other. Aissatou understands Ramatoulaye's pain because she has lived almost the same problem. She knows that her friend is going through the suffering with which she had to cope when her husband took a second wife. Victims of the system of polygamy, they join forces and comfort each other. Thus, friendship gives them an opportunity to strengthen their connection and ease the pain of betrayal. Betty Taylor Thompson joins Hudson-Weems in characterizing *So Long a Letter* as an Africana womanist novel:

The protagonist continues to long for a family centered existence and for a loving companion. In fact, she misses her husband even though he has rudely cast her outside.

Notably, according to the postulates defined as characteristic of Africana women, there is the desire to have fulfilling relationships with Africana men, contrasting with the feminists' desire to free themselves entirely from male influence. (179)

Ramatoulaye's willingness to tolerate polygamy and her accommodating views about men's and women's relationships explains the different stand of feminism she adopts from that of her friend, Aissatou. Although she believes in women's emancipation, she also takes a serious consideration of African traditional values that do not always match feminist standpoints.

Hudson-Weems notes,

Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for they would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs. (*African Woman Literary Theory* 73)

Hudson-Weems' rising rhetoric is unrealistic, of course: it would take a miracle for all women to be friends. The expectations placed on female solidarity are high; some women may believe in the project and commit themselves to reaching out and helping other women, but others may not. Hudson-Weems' optimism not only secures women's well being but their children's as well. She is inspired by the African proverb that states that it takes a village to raise a child, asserting that female friendship may also assure family security as a whole.

Although Hudson-Weems theorizes Africana womanism, not all black diasporic women have adopted the concept; this split actually creates a polemic among black scholars. Hudson-Weems argues that feminism is primarily a white women's movement that does not take into account black women's experiences. Critics as Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn M. Simien point out the weaknesses in Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism theory. They denounce its "limited antisexist politics," which does not offer women enough protection. Collins, on the other hand, does not grant any importance to the debate around the term and claims that the substance and ideas matter more than any name.

Collins emphasizes the uniqueness of African American women's experiences because of the historical and cultural backgrounds related to slavery and racial segregation. The similarities in black diasporic women's experiences are more important than their differences, and this reality allows them to socialize in order to fight their oppressions. Reflecting on African American women, Collins observes,

Being Black and female in the United States continues to expose African-American women to certain common experiences. U.S. Black women's similar work and family experiences as well as our participation in diverse expressions of African-American

culture mean that, overall, U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. (23)

Morrison, Bâ and Atta encourage serious and mutual commitment between black women in order to heal wounds linked to oppression related to race, class and patriarchal constraint. Obioma Nnaemeka states, “Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves” (19). The feeling of solidarity usually urges women to call each other sister in the African American community. It entails more emphasis on the community and less on individual selves, and this group-oriented view represents a good opportunity for black women to form strong bonds.

Female friendship is a non-sexual relationship between women based on giving and receiving emotional and moral support, sharing stories and experiences, caring and nurturing each other. This form of relationship may occur between any women and does not necessarily involve sibling or mother-daughter relationships. Hudson-Weems defines such a bonding:

This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood. (*Africana Womanism* 65-6)

Women friends provide for each other dependability that goes beyond the concern for self and aims at reaching out to sisters in an attempt to help and elevate them. Morrison describes this form of relationships during girlhood years in both *Sula* and *Love*, as characters build successful bonds during their childhood. In fact, in *Sula*, Nel and Sula build a rare form of bonding that

allows them to grow and develop identities; in the same way, in *Love*, Christine and Heed use their friendship to fill in gaps in their lives. However, sisterhood stops with childhood in Morrison's novels and gives way to tensions and conflicts. Morrison clearly distinguishes childhood from adult friendships by the solidarity that characterizes the first and the problems that make the second fail. Childhood friendships are more successful in Morrison's novels than adulthood bonding because self-centeredness becomes a larger issue as children grow up.

As an epistolary novel that consists of serious exchanges, sharing of experiences and mutual counseling, *So Long a Letter* foregrounds the nurturing bonding that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou strive to build and maintain. Commenting on this relationship, Hudson-Weems asserts, "The kind of friendship these women have goes beyond confiding in one another and sharing commonalities. Not only do they share their feelings, they share material things as well" (*Africana Womanism* 97). Atta also raises the issue of sisterhood in *Everything Good Will Come*, in which Enitan Taiwo and Sherifat Bakare use their friendship to fight insecurities during their girlhood and assure their safety and survival while facing political instability and male chauvinism. This bonding helps them build and strengthen their self-esteem. These women friends can share stories support each other, or just sit down to talk.

In their fiction, Morrison, Bâ and Atta present ordinary women. These women form bonds; they may not even believe in feminist principles, but their experiences or environment urge them toward female solidarity. In exploring the social and psychological contexts and implications of friendships, these texts contribute to an understanding of African and African American women. Collins reflects,

For African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing

U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African-American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African-American women within the group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others. (9)

Collins invites black women intellectuals to recognize the various ways of producing knowledge about African American women. Moreover, issues like individual feeling call not only for what Collins names “critical social theory” but also literary criticism. Serious reflection on experiences may take various forms, including prose and poetry. Literature typically presents the complexities of human relationships and social experiences by exploring the social and psychological aspects of human life. Through a careful combination of characters, settings and contexts, literature engages in examining complex relationships in different plots. This dissertation will use characterization and plot analysis to examine the significance of female friendship and the different challenges it faces.

Since to some degree literature mirrors life, black women writers may be understood to present at least, in a structural or generalized imaginary sense, the identities of black diasporic women throughout their texts. Writing becomes another form of coalition that eliminates borders and focuses mainly on what unites these women. Commenting on this solidarity, Davies states, “The reality of imperialism mandates specific anti-imperialist alliances and discourses that eschew the trap of prescribed local/national/identity boundaries” (15). Black women writers make connections and use their writing to sensitize people about their identities.<sup>6</sup> This attempt at unity expresses a strong opposition to the “divide and rule”<sup>7</sup> system of the colonizer. With reference to black women’s writings, Nnaemeka argues, “The texts discuss women’s solidarity as an issue of survival; solidarity among women offers a safety net and a breath of fresh air in a



suffocating, constraining environment” (19). Black women often use their texts to describe various challenges facing their communities. Gay Wilentz suggests, “Their aim is to build communities more in line with African cultural values. As women, they take on their traditional role as educators of present and future generations to voice their heritage, which has been distorted and effaced for many in the Black community through imposed dominant cultural values and attempts at assimilation” (xvi). Their writing also crosses borders. Davies adds, “The Pan-African community thus created the conditions for another “imagined community,” on the one hand a unified homeland, on the other a diaspora” (20). An “imagined community,” a concept coined by Benedict Anderson, theorizes the foundation of the connections that people claim exist between them. Nnaemeka reflects, “Works by black women writers also show that there are other channels, such as writing and solidarity/sisterhood, through which women survive and gain freedom. Extreme pain and suffering push women victims to the brink of madness” (19). The experiences they depict in their texts may reflect the lives of black diaporic women. Laura Dubek observes, “No wonder that in defining an African feminist literary tradition, critics highlight female friendship and women’s solidarity as central themes in the novels by black African women” (212).

The race issue is related to the problem of class since most black women belong to the lower class. Class is also a patriarchal agent which oppresses women and causes them much pain. For instance, in *Love*, Bill Cosey is the physical embodiment of class, and he uses his wealth and authority to subjugate Christine and Heed. Both race and class as patriarchal institutions represent a danger to female friendship. These agents reveal a certain inequality in the society that translates into a form of oppression. Throughout the interaction of race, class and gender, female bonding is at risk because gender suffers from the influence of the first elements.

The hard economic situation of black women transforms them into second-class citizens, and female friendship can conceivably function as a refuge where they can find comfort and security and heal the wounds resulting from prejudice. In *Love*, however, using his authority and influence to blackmail a poor, working class family into letting him marry their eleven-year-old daughter, Cosey demonstrates the power of a higher-class status and highlights the frailty of the lower class. Through this marriage, Cosey manages to put an end to the friendship that Christine, his granddaughter, and Heed, his would-be wife, strive to build. In other words, sisterhood falls victim to class through the figure of Cosey. Likewise, in *Sula*, the joined forces of race and class pose a threat to female friendship and are a major cause of its failure. Indeed, the combined effects of race and class push Jude, Nel's husband, into another patriarchal institution, marriage, which also fails to redeem his damaged manhood. A victim of prejudice, he, in return, becomes a passive agent of patriarchy and puts a definite end to the friendship between Nel and Sula.

The racial and class oppression that black women experience make them likely to live in the same neighborhoods, go to the same schools and hold the same sort of domestic jobs. Their precarious economic situation condemns them to live in areas they can afford, enroll their children in public schools and find low-paid jobs to secure their survival. Their proximity also allows them to build coalitions that work for the benefit of the community. Collins argues,

The heavy concentration of U.S. Black women in domestic work coupled with racial segregation in housing and schools meant that U.S. Black women had common organizational networks that enabled them to share experiences and construct a collective body of wisdom. This collective wisdom on how to survive as U.S. Black women constituted a distinctive Black women's standpoint on gender-specific patterns of racial segregation and its accompanying economic penalties. (24)

The realities Collins describes affect Sula and Nel, who attend the same school and grow up in the same neighborhood. Having to live in the Bottom,<sup>8</sup> a community named from a joke about a master tricking his slave into accepting a hilly land, they form bonds. This bonding allows them to fight against the impact of patriarchal oppression and helps them heal their common wounds. Collins adds, “Whereas racial segregation was designed to keep U.S. Blacks oppressed, it fostered a form of racial solidarity that flourished in all-Black neighborhoods. In contrast, now that Blacks live in economically heterogeneous neighborhoods, achieving the same racial solidarity raises new challenges” (35). Ironically, having to live in oppressive conditions can enable black women to form bonds and cultivate female solidarity in order to survive.

Other forms of connections exist that may involve two or more women who care and nurture each other. For instance, in Africa, women’s associations<sup>9</sup> work primarily to provide economic freedom to women. Through these organizations, and the necessity to plan and work together for the success of their projects, women create solid ties and cultivate a rare form of female solidarity. Bound by the same goals, they realize that they have to work in unity, peace and harmony in order to achieve their dreams. This collective commitment to the same objective results in a strong sisterhood that benefits not only the women themselves but also the community as a whole. Conscious of challenges, these women know that in order to improve their conditions they need to have access to economic power; therefore, they join together and build female solidarity in an attempt to improve their conditions and achieve financial freedom. Oyeronde Oyewumi states,

Because of the strong sense of community and the fact that individual experience could best be realized in a group, formal organizations became a way of life. Besides kinship organizations, age trades, occupational guilds, and religious, social, and political

organizations are all features of African community life. In Yorubaland as one case, associations were called *egbe*, which also means peer group. Members of a convivial *egbe* referred to each other as *oore*-friend. (17)

This form of female friendship works well because in addition to caring and nurturing, the material aspect keeps relationships strong and eliminates or minimizes financial dependence on men. These organizations are very important in Africa where the economic context requires that women participate efficiently in the struggle for development. Bâ demonstrates the significance of these organizations in her depiction of beneficial involvement in them by Ramatoulaye and her daughter, Daba. Atta also presents a form of organization through the Bakare family. Facing economic hardships after her father's death, Sheri starts a catering business that involves her stepmothers, sisters, sisters-in-law and herself. This activity offers the Bakare women economic independence and an opportunity to cultivate female solidarity.

In addition to bonds formed through organizations, in certain African communities sisterhood relates to co-mothering.<sup>10</sup> Because motherhood is very important in African society, sisterhood evolves around co-mothering as women exchange their experiences and share secrets of childcare. This form of solidarity does not concern only blood mothers but all female members of the clan or village who participate in the upbringing and well being of all children. This task usually goes beyond childcare and extends to the women themselves. This expression of female solidarity offers wisdom to the younger women and creates solid ties. Oyewumi argues, "In many African societies, there is no sisterhood without motherhood. The most profound sisterly relations are to be found in co-mothering, which is the essence of community building. Co-mothering as a communal ideal and social practice is not reducible to biological motherhood, it transcends it" (13). These ties are strengthened through maturity, and their

mothering experiences become another opportunity to express and strengthen their bonds. Bâ depicts this form of co-mothering in her novel through Farmata, Ramatoulaye's friend and griot,<sup>11</sup> who is deeply involved in helping Ramatoulaye raise her children. Indeed, Farmata informs Ramatoulaye of her daughter Aissatou's pregnancy and helps resolve the problem it creates. Although Ramatoulaye and Farmata may not share the same ideas about child raising because the first is an educated woman whereas the second is still traditional, Farmata continues to offer Ramatoulaye her point of view, feeling that she has the duty to co-mother with Ramatoulaye not only because they grow up together, but also because her role as a griot gives her the prerogatives to counsel and advise her "guer"<sup>12</sup> in anything.

Although some women cultivate sisterhood, other women's hostile attitude toward each other represents another threat to female friendship. Not all women believe in the principles of female solidarity. The counseling and mentoring that occur in female friendships are a good opportunity to heal from psychological wounds and start a new life, if necessary, with more confidence and assurance. However, some women do not believe in the ideals of sisterhood. This attitude may result in violent and destructive conduct toward other women. Davies reflects, "We have to move to recognize those Black women who do not see the validity in any feminist politics of any sort as an indication of where they are located *vis-à-vis* social movements, class position, privilege, etc. In effect, then, not all Black women automatically are sisters-in-struggle" (28). Rivalry does exist and often keeps women in a battleground in which animosity and competition are the rules, rather than bonding and solidarity. In an essay about female friendship, Morrison reflects, "I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. I am alarmed by a growing absence of decency on the killing floor of

professional women's worlds" (283-84). Morrison's contrast indicates the complexity of women's relationships, which cannot be characterized as wholly nurturing or complete failure. Indeed, in *Sula*, Nel and Sula's girlhood bonding turns into a sour relationship that keeps them estranged for the rest of their lives. When Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude, she not only hurts her friend but also puts an end to their friendship. Their close bonding turns overnight into an estranged relationship.

Another cause for the failure of female friendship is a focus on self. Putting forward personal objectives to the detriment of other women may be seen as selfishness, that is, caring for personal interest without paying sufficient attention to the group or another person. This emphasis on self puts female bonding in danger since this self-centeredness does not allow a sincere commitment to the other. Personal safety is very important for an individual; however, commitment to the other and the community is fundamental since it assures the security of the whole group. Morrison reflects on this issue:

In your rainbow journey toward the realization of personal goals, don't make choices based only on your security and your safety. Nothing is safe. [. . .] But in pursuing your highest ambitions, don't let your personal safety diminish the safety of your stepsister. In wielding the power that is deservedly yours, don't permit it to enslave your stepsisters. Let your might and your power emanate from that plane in you that is nurturing and caring. (283-84) <sup>13</sup>

Using the tale about Cinderella and her stepsisters as her parable, Morrison warns women about the danger of putting forward their personal objective if it means destroying other sisters. Morrison also raises this issue in *Sula*, in which the eponymous protagonist endangers her friendship with Nel because of her self-centeredness. In so doing, Sula not only causes pain to

her friend but also to herself, since she deprives herself of Nel's company as well as nurturing and care. Hudson-Weems observes, "We disrespect and disregard each other's personhood with the individualistic notion that the most important thing in life is self. Moreover, our inflated egos frequently hinder us in extending ourselves to others, particularly in times of need" (*Africana Womanist* 70).

The conflict over self raises another concern, about the need to distinguish between self-love and self-centeredness. Actually, self-love, in the sense of literally loving oneself, provides women with self-esteem and confidence necessary for their own survival. Morrison raises the issue of self-love in *The Bluest Eye*, in which Pecola Breedlove's lack of self-love leads her to a dramatic identity crisis that causes her downfall. Lacking a stable identity, Pecola sees blue eyes as the only way to restore her shattered self. hooks argues: "No woman who chooses to be self-loving ever regrets her choice. Self-love brings her greater power and freedom. It improves her relationships with everyone. But most especially it allows her to live in community with other women, to stand in solidarity and sisterhood" (137). Self-centeredness, however, over-emphasizes self and inhibits the ability to care about anybody but oneself. While self-love strengthens the individual and provides her with the opportunity to care for other people, selfishness makes the individual care only for herself but not for the other.

In Africa, female solidarity also encounters other structurally based problems. Women are often expected to move into their husbands' houses, where they find sisters-in-law and other female relatives. These women do not always co-exist peacefully and may engage in rivalries in order to safeguard their role in the family. The extended nature of the African household fills it with many women who do not necessarily share the same viewpoints and priorities. Wilentz notes,

Historically and today, a woman's function in the compound extends to the entire village communal life, but there have been changes which have limited women's role as citizen in her own right. The balanced interrelationship between the woman and her community was disrupted during colonialism, and that disruption has added to women's present-day second-class citizenship. (xxiv)

Indeed, colonization has an impact on the lives of colonized people and their environments. The clash between traditional African values and the modernity colonialism embodies brings changes to African households. Although Atta mainly portrays modern households in *Everything Good Will Come*, there is no doubt that tradition still plays a key role. For instance, despite Enitan's education and her stand about women's rights, her husband's extended family oppresses her and threatens the stability of her marriage. Enitan and her mother-in-law fail to develop a productive relationship because they have different conceptions about the role of women in the family.

Reflecting on these differences, Oyewumi asserts, "In many African societies, any notion of a universal female sisterhood will immediately run up against the differing and often opposed interests of women as daughters and women as wives in the lineage and in the society at large" (3). These conflicts of interest set up real rivalries within families, as sisters-in-law fight and daughters and mothers-in-law compete. Any attempt to compel all women to see themselves as sisters will fail because women have first to acknowledge the importance of female bonding, an acknowledgement that cannot be forced. Women have to be willing to participate and believe in the principles of female bonding to make a valuable contribution. Sisterhood between black women or women of all races needs to be based on principles that all the members share and acknowledge. If not, conflict may endanger the stability of the coalition.



In *So Long a Letter*, Bâ mainly emphasizes the female friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, but she also portrays the selfishness of Lady Mother-in-Law, who compels her daughter, Binetou, to steal Ramatoulaye's husband, leaving Ramatoulaye alone with twelve children. In so doing, Lady Mother-in-Law takes the side of patriarchy that imposes polygamy on women. She does not think of Ramatoulaye as a woman like herself or her daughter; rather, she acts to improve her personal living conditions and elevate herself to middle class status through the privileges Modou Fall will grant her by marrying her daughter. The class issue outweighs any concern for female solidarity. She only takes into consideration her immediate need to have a house and to secure a car for her daughter. The example of Lady Mother-in-Law demonstrates not only a failed potential relationship between the two older women but the destruction of an existing friendship between younger women. She urges her daughter to put an end to her friendship with Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, and become Ramatoulaye's co-wife and rival. She works as an agent of patriarchy and causes the oppression of Ramatoulaye and her children.

Another major element that leads to the break up of female bonding is the failure to handle differences well. Women do not have the same backgrounds: they come from different environments and live different realities. However, acknowledging these differences is vital in order to move forward into understanding. Differences are not the same as divisions. The works of Morrison, Bâ and Atta demonstrate the importance of tackling disagreements and attempting to establish common ground. Referring to African American women, hooks asserts,

By no longer passively accepting the learned tendency to compare and judge, we could see value in each experience. We could also see that our different experiences often meant that we had different needs, that there was no one strategy or formula for the

development of political consciousness. By mapping out various strategies, we affirmed our diversity while working towards solidarity. Women must explore various ways to communicate with one another cross-culturally if we are to develop solidarity. When women of color strive to learn with and about one another, we take responsibility for building Sisterhood. (*Feminist Theory* 60)

In *Everything Good Will Come*, Atta implicitly encourages women to work on differences in order to overcome obstacles and challenges to their friendship. Through the successful bonding between Enitan and Sheri, who have different tribal, ethnic and religious backgrounds, Atta addresses the perpetrators of the Biafra war,<sup>14</sup> a secessionist conflict that opposed the Southeastern provinces of Nigeria to the federal government from July 6, 1967 to January 13, 1970. In the novel, while Sheri and Enitan refuse to see their differences as a handicap to their friendship, Nigerian leaders fail to work on the same differences that lead to a very deadly and painful war. Facing the constant threat of patriarchal oppression and political instability, the two friends understand that they need to preserve their friendship, and clearing differences is an important step toward its success. Davies observes, “Often it is the inability to cross boundaries for reconnection which causes distancings, misunderstandings. [. . .] Women can communicate, work together with multiple languages” (18). Through the depiction of Sheri and Enitan, Atta demonstrates that some differences can be very constructive and contribute to the foundation of a true female friendship. The novel shows that difference must not be an occasion for hatred and violence of any form. The ability to listen to others’ ideas may be very helpful. Engaging in discussions might have given Nigerian officials a chance to avoid war; however, they fail to take advantage of such an opportunity.

The dissertation consists of an introductory chapter, two main parts and a conclusion. After this introduction, the first part is divided into two chapters that examine the relationships that Morrison portrays in her novels *Sula* and *Love*. The first chapter raises the issue of girlhood bonding and presents Sula and Nel in *Sula*, and Christine and Heed in *Love*, who devote themselves to each other in a remarkable form of female friendship. The second chapter explores how the relationship between Sula and Nel as well as Christine and Heed suddenly change from nurturing sisterhoods to a conflict that keeps them estranged for the rest of their lives. The negative impacts of patriarchal oppression and self-centeredness lead to the destruction of female friendship. The second part is also made of two chapters that study the female friendships that Bâ and Atta describe in their novels. The third chapter highlights the relationship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in *So Long a Letter*, whose friendship helps them challenge patriarchy and polygamy. Their bonding not only gives them an opportunity to empower each other but also to develop female solidarity. The fourth chapter foregrounds how Enitan and Sherifat in *Everything Good Will Come* manage to handle their ethnic and religious differences and strive to survive the dangerous and chaotic situation in Nigeria where the military plunges the country into total instability. Despite the constraint of the Biafra war and patriarchal institutions, they develop a female solidarity that offers them comfort, security and healing. All four novels foreground the potential of female friendship and encourage women to face and overcome challenges.

PART I FEMALE FRIENDSHIP IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND *LOVE*

## CHAPTER 1. GIRLHOOD RELATIONSHIPS

A. *SULA*

Morrison's *Sula* and *Love* portray successful girlhood bonds that allow Sula and Nel in the first novel, and Christine and Heed in the second, to build new identities and comfort and support each other. In *Sula*, the friendship between Sula and Nel gives them the opportunity to achieve a unity between self and other that empowers them in the face of failed mother/daughter relationships. Although the portrayal of friendship in *Love* is not as detailed as that of *Sula*, and even though Morrison does not emphasize the issue of self in the bond between Christine and Heed, *Love* also portrays a sisterhood that helps young girls survive their estranged mother-daughter relationships.

Through the friendship between Sula and Nel, and the bond between Christine and Heed, Morrison foregrounds the success of these relationships in the early stage of the girls' lives and highlights the impact female solidarity has on children. These novels demonstrate how female friendship helps these girls face challenges related to race, class and gender oppression and leads to healing and survival. As depicted in these novels, female bonding proves beneficial to young girls because it gives them an opportunity to share experiences, provide and receive counseling, protect and defend each other, and help change their views about their homes. Based on these relationships, Morrison's novels seem to encourage women to form bonds and put the focus on girlhood relationships when children are young enough better to avoid conflicts of interest. In

*Sula*, Nel and Sula develop a strong sisterhood in their childhood that allows them to be “two throats and one eye” (*Sula* 147). This relationship gives them an opportunity to grow as they find in each other a complementary self: “their meeting was [. . .] fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (*Sula* 51).

Indeed, Sula and Nel’s girlhood friendship is so powerful that they feel like the same person, and this strong connection benefits them both: “their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (*Sula* 83). Their bonding represents an example of female solidarity that impacts their lives in numerous ways “Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality” (*Sula* 53). The strength of their bonding allows them to care for and nurture each other and to heal their different wounds. Describing African American communities, Hudson-Weems argues,

There has always been bonding among Africana women that cannot be broken—genuine sisterhood. This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody emphatic understanding of each other’s shared experiences. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards. (*Africana Womanism* 65)

Similarly, hooks states, “We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood” (*Feminist Theory* 43). hooks encourages women to believe in female friendship and understand its significance and the well being it can provide them. Nel and Sula adhere to hooks’ philosophy since they share joys and sorrows, and they not only

sympathize with each other, they also empathize. “In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other” (*Sula* 84). Commenting on Nel and Sula’s relationship, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos observes, “It is to other women that we go for the deepest understanding, for the most uncontingent love. Women without female bonds are, in my opinion, the most lost and alienated of human beings” (51). Demetrakopoulos gives here her own opinion, which some people may not share; however, simply put, the statement emphasizes the importance of sisterhood to women’s survival. Demetrakopoulos foregrounds female solidarity between women as a means of survival and healing. She joins Hudson-Weems and hooks in their efforts to promote female friendship through their theories on womanism and sisterhood presented in the Introduction.

However, despite the closeness and intensity of Sula and Nel’s friendship, this relationship cannot simply be labeled homoerotic<sup>15</sup> as critics like Barbara Smith and Adrienne Rich have suggested. As playmates, Sula and Nel share deep and profound moments in their childhood and get involved in very personal and intimate play, which urges these critics to consider their relationship homoerotic. One such game, which consists of digging holes in the beach, demonstrates the adolescents’ desire to discover sex, but their interest is clearly in boys. They enjoy the company of boys and the comments they make about them too, as when Ajax calls them “pig meat.” The narrator states, “It was in that summer, the summer of their twelfth year, the summer of the beautiful black boys, that they became skittish, frightened and bold—all at the same time [. . .] They decided to go down by the river where the boys sometimes swam” (*Sula* 56). At twelve, the adolescents experience the beginning of puberty and become interested in sexuality, especially in boys. Interestingly, Smith herself seems to acknowledge that the

“homoerotic” dimension of the girls’ relationship is primarily metaphoric in her comments on *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*.

In both works the relationships between girls and women are essential, yet at the same time physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women. Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in rereading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison’s consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family.

In fact, Smith does not base her lesbian reading of the novel on a sexual relationship between Nel and Sula but on the intensity of their friendship. This theory supports Rich’s broad definition of the lesbian continuum,<sup>16</sup> which does not necessarily concern sex, but any emotional and psychological well being between women. Rich asserts, “*The Girl* and *Sula* are both novels which reveal the lesbian continuum in contrast to the shallow or sensational ‘lesbian scenes’ in recent commercial fiction. Each shows us woman-identification untarnished [. . .] by romanticism” (656). The complicity and understanding between the girls creates a deep nurturing and caring which, if possibly homoerotic, also exceeds the boundaries of our common assumptions about “lesbian” relationships. As Houston A. Baker, Jr. declares,

It is surely true that Nel and Sula’s relationship is the signal, foregrounded instance of the novel of productive and symbiotic human allegiance. The girls begin by loving each other with uncritical acceptance and shared curiosity of adolescent adoration. They remain, as well, emotionally dependent upon one another—even when they are physically separated or distanced by seeming betrayal. As a representation of woman’s bonding, then, *Sula* works toward Smith’s specifications. (250)

Baker Jr. identifies in the principle of lesbian continuum that Smith describes because of the strength and closeness of Nel and Sula's relationship. However, he further comments, "I want to suggest that a lesbian reading, while persuasive in its description of the best aspects of the relationship between Sula and Nel, leaves too much of the novel's exquisitely detailed and richly imaged concern for the values of the Bottom out of account" (250). Morrison herself does not agree with a lesbian reading of *Sula* but, instead, encourages us to see that women and girls in particular may nurture strong bonding without being sexually involved.

More important than its possible homoerotic undertone, however, is the fact that Nel and Sula's girlhood relationship helps these protagonists survive estranged mother-daughter relationships. Realizing that their mothers are too demanding or do not provide them with the care they need, Sula and Nel build a female bond that grants them much comfort. Their mutual commitment helps them survive their mothers' lack of concern or demands. The narrator asserts, "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (*Sula* 52). As the self-proclaimed embodiment of morality, Nel's mother, Helene, is conventional and law-abiding. A member of the church, she embraces the conservative values of her community and raises her daughter according to the same values, even though this upbringing becomes clearly oppressive. By contrast, Sula's mother, Hannah, is sexually free and openly challenges moral conventions, particularly regarding male/female relationships. This freedom grants her a certain degree of autonomy but also explains why she does not care for Sula or raise her according to the rules of society. Left on her own, Sula suffers from this abandonment in a manner that parallels Nel's resistance to her mother's overly restrictive rules. The difference between Helene and Hannah is crucial to the future of the girls they raise, but what is



emphasized by Morrison's depiction of girlhood friendship in *Sula* is the way that both women ultimately fail to care for and nurture their daughters. This lack of maternal care is ultimately filled by the friendship that develops between Sula and Nel.

While Nel struggles against her mother's constant demands, Sula faces her mother's neglect; however, their bond allows both of them to overcome this experience and succeed in building new identities. Raised by a pious Christian grandmother, Helene strives hard to make Nel a good example of an ideal woman as expected by the community. Helene utterly rejects any connection with her own mother, a Creole prostitute<sup>17</sup> whom she despises for her immorality. Constantly on alert for any sign in Nel that may represent the bad blood she resents in her mother, Helene subjects Nel to a very rigorous upbringing that makes her docile and passive. This upbringing is very hard on Nel, who suffers under her mother's rules. The narrator observes, "During all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula" (*Sula* 83). Meanwhile, Sula suffers from her mother's distance from and indifference toward her. Caring more for her lovers than her daughter, Hannah neglects Sula. Aware of Hannah's "loose" manners, Helene strives to protect Nel from the environment of temptation which Sula's house represents, but Hannah's lack of care ultimately facilitates her daughter's friendship with Sula. Sula, in turn, finds in her friendship with Nel the comfort and nurturing her mother fails to provide her. Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek reflect, "The friendship between Sula and Nel in many ways nurtures both girls by supplying the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships" (40). For instance, Nel's voice awakens Sula from the anger and sadness of Hannah's comments about how she loves Sula but just does not like her. Talking with her friend about her daughter, Hannah states, "You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her" (*Sula* 57). These comments sadden Sula considerably until

Nel's voice brings her back to reality by simply calling her. The narrator sums up this experience as follows, "She [Sula] only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight" (*Sula* 57). These comments indicate the kind of relationship Hannah has with her daughter, who suffers from these words. Sula does not nurture female solidarity with her mother, who hurts her emotionally through her comments. Instead, when the mother who was supposed to provide her with care and security fails her, her dear friend, Nel, rescues her from the breakdown brought on by her mother's remarks.

The failure of the mother-daughter relationships in *Sula* contrasts with the success of Nel and Sula's girlhood friendship. The simple presence of one girl provides the other with support and comfort. Without being aware of the reason for Sula's pain, Nel's mere voice and presence soothes the pain that her mother's comments cause, elevating Sula from despair to joy at being with her friend. Afterward, emotionally shaken by this painful experience, Sula needs Nel in order to survive. As Wilfred D. Samuels and Hudson-Weems note, "Nel's confidence and Sula's insecurity formed the foundation of the reciprocity that characterized their friendship, providing them with the most important relationship in their lives" (44). The care and compassion Nel offers Sula during this difficult time greatly contributes to her recovery. In turn, Sula also helps Nel face her mother's control and unreasonable demands.

Sula and Nel's friendship not only allows them to empower each other, it also helps them develop new senses of identity. Nel in particular experiences different stages of self-development that play a key role in Morrison's depiction of girlhood friendship. Her first experience of self-awareness occurs during the trip<sup>18</sup> she makes with her mother to the South. This trip introduces

her to racism, a phenomenon she has never known in her life. In the segregated train that takes Nel and Helene to New Orleans, Nel discovers her mother's weakness and decides from then on to claim her selfhood. When Helene realizes the mistake she makes by entering the white part of the train, she laughs which causes not only the rage of the conductor but also the anger of the black soldiers, who are humiliated by the way her act draws attention to racial boundaries. As the narrator asserts, Nel learns something important from the way the black men look at her mother: "It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly" (*Sula* 11). Nel does not appreciate her mother's laughter either, because it causes the hatred in these men's eyes. This experience gives Nel a new awareness of her mother's identity as a black woman, who faces the challenge of living in both a racially segregated and patriarchal world. As a result, the episode in the New Orleans train becomes a crucial moment of awakening for Nel regarding both racial and gender identity. In response; however, Nel decides to affirm herself in terms different from those of her mother. She reflects, "'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me'" (*Sula* 28). This new claim makes Nel conscious of who she is. She disassociates herself from her parents because of the shame her mother causes her. She just wants to be herself, not the daughter of this lady whose frailty she has just discovered. The narrator explains Nel's plan after this experience: "Leaving Medallion would be her goal. But that was before she met Sula, the girl she had seen for five years at Garfield Primary but never played with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula's mother was sooty. The trip,

perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (*Sula* 29).

The incident on the train is not the only experience that alienates Nel from her mother. Throughout Nel’s childhood, Helene imposes on her daughter a conception of beauty defined in terms of the dominant white culture and Caucasian racial characteristics. Helene causes a serious problem of identity in her daughter by denying the essence of her blackness, making her daughter believe that her nose is too broad and therefore ugly. Helene constantly encourages Nel to pull on and reshape her nose, even giving her a clothespin to use for this purpose. Fortunately, Nel’s meeting with Sula helps her realize that she does not have to follow her mother’s wishes that she keep pulling her nose in order to straighten it. Nel’s defiance of her mother in befriending Sula is rewarding because through it she learns to be her own self despite the different challenges she faces. The narrator explains, “After she met Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences—smooth hair—no longer interested her” (*Sula* 55). The shape of her nose does not matter for Nel after meeting Sula; she finds in Sula someone who understands and accepts her as she is without the need for the painful experience of reshaping her nose.

For once, Nel courageously defies her mother, and her efforts to befriend Sula prove worthwhile because they encourage her to be more independent. From then on, Nel defines herself according to what she conceives of her self, not what her mother thinks she should be. Gillespie and Kubitschek assert, “In their childhood friendship, Nel’s and Sula’s antithetical strengths and weaknesses assure them mutual dependency and thus equality of participation. Sula’s preservation of her self allows Nel to limn boundaries between herself and her mother; in

turn, Nel's attention to details of connection and her calm consistently allow Sula's rigid boundaries to become more fluid" (41). As a result, Nel's friendship with Sula liberates her from her mother's oppressive rules thereby revealing that female friendship can prove even stronger than the motherhood/daughter relationship. *Sula* demonstrates the potential for female friendship to heal wounds inflicted by overly protective or neglectful mothers, providing girls with emotional support. Nel and Sula regularly learn from each other, and their differences do not represent an obstacle to their friendship but constitute its strength. Each helps the other build an identity and becomes a mentor ready to assist in finding solutions to problems posed by their problematic upbringing.

The way in which female friendship helps Nel and Sula overcome their troubled relationships with their mothers is reflected in the fact that friendship brings them to rethink their homes. The attraction Nel and Sula find in each other's home reflects how they complement each other and shows the difference in their family background. Nel is suffocated in her mother's too orderly house but finds comfort in Eva's big and disorganized home, whereas Sula is fascinated with the neatness of Helene's home. The narrator explains,

Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time. [. . .] As for Nel, she preferred Sula's woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (*Sula* 29)

This mutual admiration of each other's home makes each look at her home with new eyes. Unlike Sula, Nel does not live with her grandmother, and the view of this one-legged<sup>19</sup> and powerful woman—Eva—impresses her. As for Sula, she is impressed with Helene, who organizes and controls everything in her house, including her own daughter. Through the contrast of the two homes, Morrison demonstrates the difference between the two families who inhabit them. The loose and disorderly manners of Hannah differ considerably from the orderly and meticulous ways of Helene. Because Sula and Nel do not like their homes, the friendship provides them with an opportunity to enjoy each other's home and therefore ease the discomfort in their family. Sula not only likes Helene's home, she also brings good fortune to it through her simple presence. "When Sula first visited the Wright house, Helene's curdled scorn turned to butter. Her daughter's friend seemed to have none of the mother's slackness" (*Sula* 29). Nel's commitment to escape the confinement of her house and her strict upbringing overpower her mother's desire to keep her away from Sula. Each finds in the other's house the comfort and security she is looking for; this contrasting appreciation reveals a difference of judgment between them which finally enriches their bond. This difference also illustrates their complementary selves since each completes the other's perceptions and opinions and changes her for the best. Kubitschek sums up this dynamic:

Sula and Nel provide one another with support crucial to establishing and maintaining their identities in somewhat hostile contexts. Nel escapes her mother's stifling conformity to middle-class norms in the less conventional Peace household. With Nel, Sula experiences the sense of order and control not present in the Peace home, as well as the love that her mother cannot offer her. (52)

This openness to new realities gives the girls an opportunity to live new experiences that can transform their perspectives and views. They have differences that do not endanger their girlhood friendship and actually seem to strengthen it and make it survive.

Beyond domestic issues, female friendship also helps Sula and Nel to cope with other important matters in their social environment. Gillespie and Kubitschek observe, “This marvelous friendship does not exist in a social vacuum, however, and just as the girls’ images of themselves are modified by the surrounding society, so is the course of the friendship”(41). Similarly, Maureen Reddy reflects, “The Sula / Nel couple [ . . . ] are the center of the plot about female friendship and female development and represent the effects of internalized racist stereotypes and the multiple oppression of black women” (3). Born and brought up in Medallion, in a neighborhood made of a nigger joke, the two girls, like most of their countrymen and countrywomen, experience race, class and gender prejudice. Doomed to grow an infertile and hilly land, the community of the Bottom faces serious problems of survival that affect Nel and Sula as they grow up. As black women, they soon realize their fate because their condition teaches them not to have expectations. Conscious of the common oppression they are living because of their race, sex and gender, they use their bonding as a peaceful weapon that allows them to fight back against prejudice. However, despite the ongoing oppression in the community, the Bottom fails to develop an efficient racial solidarity<sup>20</sup> to counteract the effects of racism. As a result, the nigger joke in *Sula* reveals a metaphor about racial prejudice. Because Morrison’s writing bears witness to the social conditions of black people, she explicitly exposes in *Sula* the impact racial segregation, racist hiring politics and racism in general has on black people. Indeed, Morrison uses a language full of metaphors and images to present the patriarchal oppression in her books. In an interview with Nellie Y. McKay, Morrison observes, “I tend not

to explain things very much, but I long for a critic who will know what I mean when I say ‘church’ or ‘community,’ or when I say ‘ancestor,’ or ‘chorus.’ Because my books come out of those things and represent how they function in the [B]lack cosmology” (15). Morrison’s writing requires that the reader have some knowledge of the African American community and its traditions. For this reason, she does not provide the details she assumes the reader already knows. She wants the reader to intervene, fill in the missing gaps and be able to understand the unwritten words of an oral language. Marc C. Conner argues, “The reader is not told where the conversation is taking place—at a card table, in the kitchen, or over a backyard fence. Morrison leaves spaces for the reader to fill. She knows that there will be ‘holes and spaces’ in the text that are caused by writing down an oral language, but Morrison also expects the reader to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge” (14). Reading and understanding the black English oral tradition requires a thorough knowledge of the black community that speaks this language. This requirement gives Morrison’s writing the reputation of being complex. However, this complexity also encourages the reader to treat the text as a piece of conversation. Conner explains,

The reader who is aware of the Black English oral tradition is also aware that he/she is obligated to participate in this conversation. The participation could be a “humh” at the end of the dialogue signifying understanding and appreciation, or it could be a smile, a laugh, a head wag, or it could put you in the mind of other women who shared their lives through conversation with friends. (15)

Conversation with the text allows for an understanding of the message in *Sula* and the meaning of the girlhood friendship at its center. This metaphorical language helps convey the message of female solidarity that goes beyond the literal features of Sula and Nel’s bonding.



In *Sula*, the struggles to maintain female friendship become a metaphor for the fight against racial, class and gender prejudice. Aware of the oppression going on in their community but unable to resolve it directly, Sula and Nel take advantage of the nurturing and caring aspects of their friendship that provide them with security and comfort. They come to understand their misfortunes related to gender and race and to find something in their friendship which nobody can deny them but themselves. This is why the friendship represents an open challenge to everything denied to them because it is their own. This sense of ownership restores their dignity and even empowers them through the recognition of their efforts as they struggle to build a sisterhood despite social challenges. The narrator observes, “So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (*Sula* 52). Sula and Nel form bonds as a response to oppression, and they unite their forces and even their selves in order to survive. In its early pages at least, then, *Sula* suggests that female bonding, by enabling solidarity, caring and nurturing in the community, can bring healing and survival.

One way in which *Sula* demonstrates the socially transformative power of female bonding is through its depiction of how Nel and Sula defend and protect one another. For instance, Sula’s willingness to defend Nel from the Irish boys’ harassment prompts her to cut her own finger. Some critics have found this act morally irresponsible. As Jane Bakerman writes, “While, in a sense, she has solved the immediate problem and while the girls have become ‘blood sisters,’ she has reacted with the violence which she can *act*, she does so irresponsibly” (31). But Sula’s desperate attempt to protect her friend has broader historical and social

implications. Specifically, Sula's self immolation repeats the act of her grandmother, Eva, when she supposedly put her leg under a train in order to collect insurance. Eva sacrificed her leg for the sake of her children because her main aim was to help her children survive. Even though Sula's actions are repulsive even to Nel, who fails to understand Sula's motives, the act of cutting her finger shows the significance of Sula's love for Nel. The act reveals the intensity of their friendship and how far Sula can go for the sake of a friend. Sula courageously endures the pain because she will not let anybody hurt Nel. As a result of the horror of the act, Sula succeeds in scaring the boys off, proving the value of friendship in establishing protection in the case of broad social threats.

As Sula literally sacrifices a piece of herself in order to help Nel, the latter also has an opportunity to protect Sula. A crucial event in the novel, Chicken Little's drowning, is significant in the girls' bonding because it seals a pact of confidentiality between them—one in which Nel decides to share responsibility for a crime committed by Sula. After Hannah's comments stating that she loves Sula but does not like her send them to the beach, Sula and Nel first play while digging holes in the sand before getting distracted by the arrival of Chicken Little. The boy draws their attention and they start to play with him by swinging him from a tree. Unfortunately, Chicken loses his balance and gets thrown far into the river. This dramatic event causes panic especially in Sula, who is responsible for the act. After a moment of confusion, both Sula and Nel head home, leaving behind them their playmate, who drowns. Without prior discussion or arrangement, they decide to remain silent. Indeed, Nel puts her friendship with Sula ahead of her duties as a citizen to report crimes to the police. She is not worried about an eventual guilty conscience for sharing the secret of the death of a child, but is more concerned about preserving the bond with her friend. Kubitschek observes, "Nel and Sula thus join forces to

affirm for each other the personal worth that the surrounding racism and sexism deny. When Nel and Sula silently agree to keep their involvement in a playmate's drowning a secret, their reliance on each other is confirmed. For each, the other is the only person who knows her completely" (52). This death tests the strength of their childhood sisterhood over the course of the three day search for Chicken Little and afterward, as they learn that friends share not only good events but bad ones as well. The narrator describes the funeral:

Nel and Sula stood some distance away from the grave, the space that had sat between them in the pews had dissolved. They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay above ground forever. At first as they stood there, their hands were clenched together. They relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter. (*Sula* 66)

Chicken Little is dead and buried but the secret of his death secures the friendship between Sula and Nel.

This special event of Chicken Little's drowning represents one of the strongest moments of their bonding. As the saying goes, the best friends are not those who hang around in happy times, but the ones who stay during difficult periods. Sula and Nel share and keep their secret, thus demonstrating a remarkable sense of solidarity. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems argue, "By providing Sula and Nel with the secret of Chicken Little's accidental death, and specifically by having Nel provide the strength and support Sula needed at the moment, Morrison further united them in a manner that would bond them for eternity. Although the action was Sula's, the involvement, as Eva would later point out, was clearly theirs together" (45). The girls' mutual

involvement in the death is solidified when Nel's silence seals her complicity. This test to their friendship raises a moral issue regarding the boundaries of a friend's obligation to another, but interestingly, this dilemma never occurs to Nel, who supports her friend apparently without ever doubting herself. Jan Furman reflects on how, in Morrison's depiction, the need for friendship prevails over conventional notions of justice:

In examining their friendship, Morrison tests its endurance. As she says, not much had been done with women as friends; men's relationships are often the subject of fiction, but what about women's strongest bonds? As perfect complements, one incomplete without the other, Sula and Nel together face life, death, and marriage, and eventually they also must face separation. Throughout, Morrison affirms the necessity of their collaboration.

(23)

The decision to keep the secret reveals the intensity of a "collaboration" that overpowers justice. Similar to criminal circumstances in other Morrison novels, such as Dorcas' murder in *Jazz*<sup>21</sup> or the women's assault in *Paradise*,<sup>22</sup> the guilty here do not serve jail time because more crucial issues are at stake. Nel places trust and confidence in Sula and vows to protect her from any danger of being reported to the police. In *Sula* Morrison draws attention to the strength of female friendship by showing how the need to empower these young girls takes priority over all other social and moral responsibilities.

The accidental death of Chicken Little leads Sula to serious reflection on the nature of her own selfhood, and these reflections ultimately point to the central issue raised in Morrison's depiction of girlhood friendship. The narrator foregrounds how Sula's reflections on Chicken Little's death lead her to an awareness of herself that began to be shaped after overhearing Hannah's comments about loving, but not *liking*, her daughter: "The first experience taught her

there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no peck around which to grow” (*Sula* 118-19). The narrator explains, Hannah’s comments teach Sula that she cannot count on the other, but then the death of Chicken Little also teaches her that even self cannot be trusted. These events create a denial of both self and other. She learns to distrust the other because she has been deceived by her own mother, but ironically she becomes aware that her own self lets her down in Chicken Little’s death. The only rescue for Sula comes from her friendship with Nel and the important fact that she does not associate Nel with either “self” or “other.” She considers Nel to be part of herself and yet not self, as well as an other who is not really an other. Therefore, she is able to keep faith and trust in this friend who provides her with comfort and nurturance as a result of the new idea of self and friendship that she represents. Struggling against the boundaries of self and various forms of denial, she finds refuge in this kind of identity that empowers both herself and her friend, strengthening their friendship. From then on, Sula keeps her distance from anybody except Nel.

A similar understanding of selfhood is represented in Nel’s character; the confusion between self and other also heals Nel’s struggle over self. Her bonding with Sula further develops her earlier recognition, on the train, of the confused sense of “self” as partially “other” that she developed to distinguish herself from her mother. Her meeting with Sula and the friendship allow her to resolve this dilemma about her fragmented self and helps her build a new personality. Their mutual assistance allows them to solve their more urgent needs. Roberta Rubenstein reflects on their bonding:

In Morrison’s narrative of a female friendship, Sula and Nel initially discover their own essences and begin to grow through their reciprocal connection; each girl seems to have, both materially and metaphysically, what the other lacks. While Sula needs Nel as “the

closest thing to both another and a self,” Nel needs Sula to act out the denied dark forces in her being. Sula, very much her mother’s daughter, is sexually free, mercurial, amoral, and as bored by connection as Nel is wedded to it. (134)

As with Sula, this confusion between self and other helps Nel fight against her shattered self that results from her trip to the South and her alienating relationship with her mother. In fact, Nel and Sula’s ability to see each other as self helps them avoid the mistrust and deception from the other and therefore enjoy the nurturing and healing qualities of their friendship.

The empowering nature of this relationship and its blurring of the boundaries of self and other seems capable of resisting the test of time. From early childhood until long after they graduate from high school, they enjoy the comfort and security of their bonding. Gillespie and Kubitschek argue, “Their friendship empowers them until the end of their adolescence, when care-taking must be extended to the adult world of love and work” (41). The mutual happiness their friendship provides transforms their lives for the best and prepares them for adulthood, even seeming to keep—at least at first—the same intensity after Sula’s ten years absence from the Bottom. Sula’s return illuminates Nel’s life, and they both enjoy their meeting. Their reunion impacts them both and fills them with enthusiasm: “Even Nel’s love for Jude, which over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart, became a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking” (*Sula* 95). Sula’s ten years of wandering fail to provide her with a replacement for Nel, the only friend she ever has, and her return fills Nel with a joy she can hardly describe. The narrator explains,

Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it was all due to Sula’s return to the Bottom. It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made

her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. (*Sula* 95)

This strong description of Nel's feelings about her friend's return reveals how they impact on each other's life. If Nel, who lives with her family, feels so strongly the return of this long absent friend, Sula's happiness may be even stronger because she is the one who adventures alone in unknown cities. Sula and Nel's new joy even affects their surroundings and makes their life easier and more comfortable.

*Sula* displays a girlhood friendship that allows Nel and Sula to develop sisterhood in ways that go beyond the merely literal. They demonstrate a strong commitment to one another, revealing the importance of a female solidarity whose consequences go beyond the immediate relationship and reach out to the entire community. Their bonding offers them an opportunity to build new identities, develop new understanding of the relationship between self and other, nurture and care for one another, defend and protect each other, and share not only joys but also sorrows. Their friendship allows them to claim their womanhood and fight against the negative impact of race, gender and class oppression in their community. The solidarity between them provides them with an opportunity to heal the wounds related to prejudice and fills them with a hope of survival. Barbara Christian sums up the girls' experiences in *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* as follows:

In both novels, the black woman, as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured [. . .] Nel and Sula's friendship is

sustained not only by their recognition of each other's restrictions but also by their anticipation of sexuality and by an ultimate bond, the responsibility for unintentionally causing the death of another. However, although the two girls share these strong bonds, they are different. (81-2)

Morrison's portrayal of girlhood relationships attests to her interest in women's friendship. Morrison uses these girlhood friendships in her novels to assert not only the possibility of building and maintaining such bonding, but also to demonstrate how vital these relationships are to the survival of black communities owing to the eminent role of women in these communities. Based on the first half of *Sula*, Morrison seems to be optimistic about the role female friendship can play against prejudice and oppression because there is no doubt that Nel and Sula's bonding grants them a new awareness that helps them face their challenges. These characters seem to make a sincere commitment to female friendship in their early years and strive hard to keep this bond alive. However, despite the strength and intensity of this friendship that offers Nel and Sula so much support and comfort, it ultimately cannot survive the pervasive threat posed by patriarchal structures—a threat that, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, begins to destroy the friendship between Sula and Nel as soon as Nel decides to marry.

## B. *LOVE*

Morrison's latest novel, *Love*, also tackles her old theme of female friendship; as in *Sula*, female bonding in *Love* is strongest during girlhood, when the friendship seems able, briefly, to take shape outside normalizing ideas of selfhood and community. In comparison with *Sula*;



however, the female friendship in *Love* is portrayed in much less detail, even in its earliest, most successful stages. The narrator, a character named L, occasionally uses the first person narrative but does not foreground the most important aspects of the friendship between Christine and Heed. Through the brief portrayal of female friendship between these girls, Morrison seems once again to urge women to cultivate female friendship, using the portrayal of successful girlhood relationships to reflect what genuine sisterhood should be. Christine and Heed, belonging to different backgrounds,<sup>23</sup> have to struggle against the boundary of class and estranged mother-daughter relationships in order to become friends. Even more so than in *Sula*, however, Morrison seems in *Love* to warn her readers that the girlhood friendship between Christine and Heed will not survive the threat of patriarchy.

Despite the limited resources offered by Morrison's portrayal of female friendship in *Love*, several elements of the novel reveal the strength of the friendship Christine and Heed strive to build. As in *Sula*, much of the strength of the friendship is described in terms of its ability to enable survival when faced with racial, class and gender prejudice. Indeed, through this girlhood bond between Christine and Heed, Morrison demonstrates how they challenge a patriarchal institution like class and overcome—if only briefly. Christine, granddaughter of Bill Cosey, the prosperous owner of a Hotel and Resort, meets Heed, a working class girl, when she inadvertently walks onto the Cosey property.

Despite others' attempts to chase away the unwanted girl, Christine insists that she must stay and play with her. In spite of the difference of class, the two girls develop a friendship that survives disapproval of May Cosey, Christine's mother, who tries hard to prevent the friendship because of Heed's lower class origins as a member of the poverty-stricken Johnson family. As in *Sula*, the joy which Christine and Heed experience in each other's presence, combined with their

determination to be friends against social expectations, overpower May's opposition to the relationship. As a result, the early pages of *Love* criticize a system that seeks to keep women apart just because of their social origins. Morrison portrays this social stratification as an obstacle to female friendship and encourages women to form bonds beyond the boundaries of class. By choosing Heed as her best friend, Christine not only challenges conventions of social stratification, she also defies her own family and its embodiment of "class" for the rest of the town.

While Christine's mother regards Heed as a member of the underclass, Heed and Christine do not see any difference between themselves. Christine shows open-mindedness by giving Heed an opportunity to enjoy her luxurious home. In fact, she allows Heed to share her bed and toys, play in their private beach, and she also gives her clothes. At age eleven, Heed and Christine's attraction to each other demonstrates that class awareness is a carefully learned feature of identity and one against which genuine female friendship has to battle. Christine remembers, "She would never forget how she had fought for her, defied her mother to protect her, to give her clothes: dresses, shorts, a bathing suit, sandals; to picnic alone on the beach. They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one's dreaming was the same as the other one's" (*Love* 133). As this statement attests, Christine and Heed have a very close relationship that allows them to share precious moments of their lives. It also suggests, as in *Sula*, that this closeness derives from blurring the conventional boundaries between self and other. To share one another's dreams is to suggest that these young girls share, through their friendship, a different understanding of selfhood and otherness than that represented in the community around them.

Apart from class, the closeness and intimacy of the bond between Christine and Heed also helps them survive their estranged mother-daughter relationships. As in many of Morrison's novels, the mother-daughter relationship is far from perfect in *Love*. In fact, the neglect these girls experience once again, as in *Sula*, paves the way for a friendship that will provide each of them with the care and comfort they have not received from their mothers. May is too busy running the hotel in order to satisfy her father-in-law, Cosey, so that her daughter Christine comes second in her life. While May is busy making money in order to secure her high-class status, Heed's mother struggles to feed her numerous children. The difficult economic situation of her family causes an emotional gap between Heed and her mother. Christine and Heed reflect, "You know May wasn't much of a mother to me / At least she didn't sell you" (*Love* 185). Christine and Heed exchange these words after their reconciliation, right before Heed dies. Both girls suffer from a serious lack of nurturing and caring from their mothers. The friendship offers them an opportunity to provide each other with what their mothers fail to give them. Neither Christine nor Heed enjoys mother-love, and they compensate for this lack through their friendship. Their bonding heals the pain related to this lack of care and restores an emotional balance but also challenges them to rethink their own identities. Christine and Heed's friendship saves them the dangers of filial alienation and nervous breakdown and, following the example of Sula and Neltheir friendship provides a brief vision of survival. However, despite Christine and Heed's efforts to build a female friendship, as an embodiment of patriarchy, Cosey destroys it. Through his marriage with Heed, his class-consciousness and authority, he endangers the girls' bond and causes its failure.

Although the girlhood relationship Morrison describes in *Love* is successful, the lack of detail limits the possibility of a deeper analysis. The reason for this lack of detail may relate to

the fact that drawing the lesson from *Sula*, Morrison may not deem it necessary to portray a female friendship with the same intensity since it is doomed to fail anyway. In fact, despite the strength, closeness and empowering nature of the bonding between Sula and Nel, it fails to overcome the threat of patriarchal institutions. The failure of the female friendship in *Sula*, despite the unity between self and other and the nurturing and caring aspects of the relationship, demonstrates that female bonding is at great risk. The narrow portrayal may foreground the destructive power of these patriarchal agents that represent a threat to female friendship. The image of the arrogant and powerful Cosey, who embodies patriarchy, may have impacted the portrayal because whatever the goodwill of Christine and Heed, Cosey overpowers them.

In both *Sula* and *Love*, Morrison portrays successful girlhood friendships that help the protagonists face the challenges of patriarchal institutions like racism and class and give them an opportunity to heal their wounds and survive. In *Sula*, the bonding between Nel and Sula allows them to overcome the struggle over self and other and face the impact of patriarchal structures on the Bottom community and on themselves. Conscious of their status as black women and their common oppression, they use their friendship to counteract the impact of race, class and gender. In *Love*, Christine and Heed defy class and form bonds that help them survive the painful experience of their mothers' estrangement. Although Heed and Christine do not achieve a unity between self and other as do Sula and Nel, they nonetheless build a connection that offers them comfort and nurturing. Both novels highlight how female bonding helps women face and survive estranged mother-daughter relationships. Through these sisterhoods, Morrison demonstrates the healing power of female friendship that allows women to fight back against prejudice and survive. In fact, these powerful bonds not only protect women from injustice, they also give them

an opportunity to develop their nurturing sensibilities in order to soothe the pain of other women and therefore accomplish female solidarity.

However, despite the strength of these sisterhoods, they end up failing because the patriarchal structures overpower them. Through these failures, Morrison foregrounds the idea that patriarchal institutions represent threats to female friendship, and they are mainly responsible for the destruction. Through various agents, patriarchy interferes with women's relationships and breaks them down. However, Morrison encourages women to make a sincere commitment to female friendship in order to escape the trap<sup>24</sup> of patriarchy. Indeed, her experiment with female friendship stops in girlhood; throughout her novels, as soon as the girls reach adulthood, drastic changes occur in the relationship. If girlhood relationships resist obstacles and oftentimes become genuine sisterhood, then maturation is the enemy of female friendship. What is it in adulthood that prevents women from bonding? Adulthood introduces many concerns about self that conflict with the open-mindedness that female bonding demands. The understanding and tolerance that prevail during girlhood clash with individual differences that cause damage to the friendship. Sula and Nel's friendship in *Sula*, and Christine and Heed's girlhood relationship in *Love*, seem too beautiful to end under whatever circumstances. The determination and devotion that nourish these sisterhoods should continue and inspire the girls as they grow into womanhood.

CHAPTER 2. FAILURE OF FEMALE BONDING IN *SULA* AND *LOVE*A. *SULA*

Although Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* present strong female friendships, female bonding usually ends in failure in Toni Morrison's novels. The girlhood relationship between Nel and Sula does not last into adulthood. Indeed, despite the strength and intensity of the female friendship Sula and Nel strive to build during their adolescent years, the bond disintegrates as they mature. In *Sula*, patriarchal structures overcome the nurturing quality of female friendship. In particular, racism, class and marriage threaten female bonding in Morrison's novel and eventually bring about its destruction. Even though Sula's sleeping with Nel's husband constitutes the apparent reason why the friendship breaks, a change in the special relationship between self and other represented by the girls' friendship is another reason for its failure. As I argued in Chapter One, the girlhood relationship between Sula and Nel is one that blurs the boundaries between self and other, but with adulthood a shift in identity occurs that transforms this relationship, making Sula all "self," and Nel all "other." Each of them is accountable for the failure of the friendship since they keep on blaming each other without trying to resolve this scission in their identities. Similarly, in *Love*, the sisterhood between Heed and Christine breaks up because of class, a patriarchal structure that endangers their friendship and provokes them into spending their entire lives fighting over the inheritance of Bill Cosey, the husband of Heed and grandfather of Christine. Morrison uses these failures in the novels to warn women about the destructive power of patriarchy and the danger a lack of female bonding is likely to cause in their lives. In fact, she presents the dramatic and

chaotic aspects of a failed friendship as a warning in order to sensitize women and encourage them to fight back against patriarchal structures.

In Morrison's novels, racism, class oppression and marriage—all presented as patriarchal institutions—have a negative impact on women's relationships, threatening female friendship and ultimately bringing about the estrangement of female characters from each other. Although *Sula* does not present a strong male figure comparable to Cosey in *Love* (a man who directly manipulates women's relationships), the combination of racism, class oppression and marriage represent a kind of "passive patriarchy" in the novel which together put an end to the sisterhood between Nel and Sula. Passive patriarchy works both directly and indirectly in *Sula* since in this novel, men are not simply portrayed as conscious oppressors of women. Indeed, men also suffer from the prejudice of the institutions of racism and class which affect the Bottom community as a whole. Susan Mayberry identifies the passivity of the male figures in *Sula*: "Along with Plum and Tar Baby, Jude is one of the most passive male figures in *Sula*, and true to form, he allows Sula to use him merely to fill up some space" (526-27). Even though this comparison seems unfair because Plum and Tar Baby are, respectively, a drug-addict and an alcoholic, Jude's weaknesses and insecurities qualify him as passive. The impacts of racism and class oppression on Jude are particularly important since, through his marriage to Nel, they ultimately impact on Morrison's portrayal of female friendship.

However, Jude is not the only passive male character in the novel. In fact, apart from the absent characters like Sula's dead father, or Nel's ocean-driven one, Boy Boy (Eva's husband,) Plum and Tar Baby do not meet the challenge. As his name indicates, Boy Boy is not mature; he left Eva with three children during one cold winter to cope on her own. The absence of strong father figures in the novel reveals the impact of race and class oppression that steals their

manhood. Their weakness contrasts with the strength of the matriarch, Eva, who challenges race, class and gender. The only male figure who makes a difference is Ajax. Although he does not play a key role in the novel, he seems more dignified than all the other men in town. However, he also suffers from racial prejudice since he cannot fulfill his dream of flying planes because he is black. For that reason, he travels from one city to another in search of an opportunity to achieve his dream in vain. Besides, victim of the trauma of World War II, Shadrack<sup>25</sup> suffers a mental breakdown that urges him to initiate a national suicide day to commemorate the killings he had witnessed. He is, therefore, victim of another patriarchal institution.

In particular, racism affects Jude when he is denied a construction job on the New Road by the white employers. This denial causes an emotional unbalance in his personality. His hopes and dreams get deferred and when he finally accepts why he will not be hired, his whole world falls apart. The narrator explains, “It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hill and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, ‘Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,’ that he got the message” (*Sula* 82). Jude is victim of a segregationist policy that excludes black people from the labor force. The pain of being rejected creates a deep trauma in him, and he experiences disappointment because of the hope he places in the job. The narrator describes his yearning, “Jude himself longed more than anybody else to be taken. Not just for the good money, more for the work itself. He wanted to swing the pick or kneel down with the string or shovel the gravel. His arms ached for something heavier than trays, for something dirtier than peelings; his feet wanted the heavy work shoes, not the thin-soled black shoes that the hotel required” (*Sula* 81-2). He needs a construction job in order to reclaim the manhood wounded by the light duties he thinks he accomplishes as a hotel employee. Jude’s deception embodies the pain of the whole



African American community in the Bottom that suffers from this discrimination. Through Jude, Morrison draws attention to the damaging effects racial oppression has on black people. The inability to find jobs causes a material deprivation that affects the person as an individual but also shapes his or her environment. As Cedric Gael Bryant notes, “For men like Jude, manhood and self-worth are inextricably bound with meaningful work and male bonding, which, as signifiers, have greater meaning than does mere money” (735). The yearning to get hired is so great that it goes with pride and goodwill. Jude dreams about his potential participation in the building: “‘I built that road.’ People would walk over his sweat for years. Perhaps a sledge hammer would come crashing down on his foot, and when people asked him how come he limped, he could say, ‘Got that building the New Road’”(Sula 82). Living in illusion causes Jude to lose any sense of self. Racial oppression as a patriarchal structure transforms him into a shadow of himself.

Although racism and class deceive and partially defeat Jude, he finds refuge in another patriarchal institution, marriage, which he hopes will redeem his manhood but which ultimately fails to resolve his problems. Deeply wounded by his failure to secure a job, Jude tries to assume a new role as a husband and head of a household in a desperate attempt to find a form of empowerment. The narrator informs us, “Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude” (Sula 83). Writing about this passage, Shari Coulis observes, “Jude marries Nel when his hopes of proving his masculinity through building the New River Road are dashed by racist hiring policies” (6-7). In other words, Jude marries Nel in order to soothe his pain and secure his manhood. He thinks marriage will reestablish the self-esteem and respect he loses through his inability to find a good job. Yet

although he indulges in marriage in an attempt to heal his wounds, marriage is not a project he carefully plans: “He wasn’t really aiming to get married” (*Sula* 80). “Passive patriarchy” emerges here, ironically, in the fact that Jude marries in order to help him face the challenges that patriarchal structures impose on him. In selecting Nel, Jude chooses the woman he believes will best help him accomplish this task. As Abel states, “The need to adopt a “man’s role” drives Jude to marry before he had intended and to select a particular type of bride; the need to soothe and mother draws Nel from Sula to Jude. As she moves away from Sula, Nel relinquishes the active portion of herself that had a role to play in their egalitarian friendship to adopt a purely female complementary role” (428). Despite the deep trauma from which Jude is suffering, Nel is ready to help him, and she therefore accepts his proposal. “Nel’s indifference to his hints about marriage disappeared altogether when she discovered his pain” (*Sula* 83). Nel provides Jude with much care and support but Jude’s insecurities only increase with the burden of becoming a breadwinner. These insecurities eventually lead to Jude’s infidelity with Sula—an act that results in stripping away the illusions created by the marriage between Jude and Nel. Yet although Jude’s infidelity with Sula certainly brings the marriage to a premature end, the marriage is doomed from the outset since the socio-economic matters that drive Jude and Nel to embrace one another are ultimately very complex and stronger than Nel’s goodwill.

Jude’s victimization under the patriarchal structures of racism and class has an even more damaging effect on Nel. Even though Nel does not suffer directly from racism at the hands of whites as does her husband, Jude brings the most damaging effects of racism into Nel’s home. Coulis reflects,

The marriage of Nel and Jude demonstrates the crippling effects of several types of oppression: Both are victims in the racist war against black people, but Nel doubly so

because Jude sees the only escape from oppression as residing in the oppression of another. Both have internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the white capitalist society that says that one's value as a man is determined by one's work and by that work's economic rewards, including ownership of a woman and children, and that one's value as a woman is determined by one's ability to attract a man and then to provide that man with children. (7)

The plight of Nel is that of a black woman living in a patriarchal society struggling with various forms of oppression. Through Jude, she faces the challenge of these institutions and the prejudices they impose on her. Reddy asserts, "The death of Nel's inner self and the death of her friendship with Sula are both attributable to externally imposed limitations on black women's lives" (4). Mayberry asserts, "Marriage for Jude and Nel is mutually self-denying. Through Jude, Nel acquires vicarious pain; with Nel, Jude is 'head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity'" (526). The attempt to make their marriage a success rips both of them of their selves and leaves two empty beings<sup>26</sup> denied of their personalities. Bakerman reflects, "Nel's marriage, however, is limiting rather than defining. [ . . . ] The marriage provides her with respectability, a house to keep, children to rear, but it is doomed both through her own and her husband's lack of self-worth. The union is made because Nel is a tool for Jude's ego, his sense of maturity having been denied him by society"(552). The more Jude struggles to recover his self the more he deprives Nel of hers, therefore making her incomplete while he tries to strengthen himself in vain. His state of mind, deeply impacted by his experiences of patriarchal oppression, does not allow him to acknowledge her efforts to help him or even stop the silent aggression he exercises on her. Jude not only continues to suffer from his wounds, but he also drains Nel in his downfall. His frailty and insecurity do not allow him to face the world alone, so he uses Nel for

the purpose of upgrading himself to a higher level. However, his attempts fail because the patriarchal institutions against which he struggles are too strong for him to overcome, and they not only damage his personality but also cause the failure of the friendship. In turn, marriage causes a serious problem of identity for Nel which leads to the break up of her friendship with Sula. Neither Jude nor Nel benefits from this union, which fails to provide them with the comfort and security for which they yearn.

The combination of the destructive effects of racism, class and marriage cause the failure of the friendship between Sula and Nel. Nel thinks that Sula's betrayal of the friendship breaks her marriage; she does not realize that the marriage actually causes the failure of the friendship. When Nel accepts Jude's proposal, she trades her friend for a husband: "Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (*Sula* 84). The marriage endangers the friendship because as soon as Nel gets married, she in effect renounces the blurring of boundaries between self and other she acquired with Sula, choosing to define herself solely as an "other" in taking care of Jude. As Christian argues, "This wedding seems to mean death, not only for Nel and Sula's girl friendship but for Jude and Nel's previous sense of themselves" (82). In marrying Jude, Nel turns her back on female friendship as a strategy for fighting back against patriarchy, despite what her earlier experiences with Sula have taught her. In contrast to the way in which the friendship between Sula and Nel enabled them to combat, as girls, various negative forces in their community, the marriage reveals that Nel's mothering cannot fix the damage that racist hiring politics and patriarchal structures cause for Jude.

Nel puts the marriage before the friendship, thinking that it is more important, and when they both collapse at the same time, she mourns the marriage because she believes it to be her

greatest loss. Nel is so used to protecting and defending Jude that she cannot hold him accountable for leaving her; she fails to recognize Jude's guilt in the affair and instead considers him a victim of Sula's tricks. She therefore blames Sula and prepares herself to live as a victim for the rest of her life. The narrator reflects, "For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (*Sula* 111). Nel is what the community expects her to be. She has alienated herself through her desire to behave as the Bottom dictates to the extent of condemning her best friend. As a result, Nel spends the rest of her life repressing the search for self while indulging in conformity. Yet Nel's reaction to Sula's act also contrasts with the community's because she totally excludes Sula from her life. Indeed, despite her conventionality, Nel seems to go a step further than the community, which has always tolerated Sula's evil. In fact, Nel rejects Sula for years and breaks the silence only when she hears that her friend is dying. Through this development, according to several critics, Morrison's novel shows Nel's reading of the relative importance of friendship and marriage to be wrong. Writing about the end of the novel, Demetrakopoulos observes, "Morrison makes it clear that following the American (perhaps white) ways of marriage and monogamy is risky fulfillment for women" (80). Similarly, Karen Carmean argues,

The story ends with Nel's painful comprehension that much of what she has believed has led her away from herself instead of leading her to truth. Morrison's dramatization of tradition's unperceived barriers to self-discovery reflects her belief in the need for experimenting with life, of breaking rules, not simply out of boredom or curiosity but because there is no other way to explore possibilities. (69)

Morrison interrogates the primacy of marriage in women's lives and sets Nel's failure as an

example and warning that marriage is not necessarily more important than friendship. Through Nel's example, Morrison's novel seems to encourage women to think it over before engaging in a patriarchal institution that oppresses women.

If Nel's marriage does not make her complete, however, Sula's independence also fails to substitute for female friendship since she ultimately lives and dies alone, separated from her community. From Sula's perspective, her friendship with Nel starts to end the day Nel marries Jude. The marriage precipitates Sula's departure and justifies her ten-year stay away from the Bottom. Abel reflects, "When Nel rests her cheek on Jude's shoulder and lowers her eyes behind her wedding veil, Sula struts out the door and out of town, fulfilling Nel's childhood dream of leaving Medallion" (429). Sula's decision to leave the Bottom right after the reception in order to attend college out of state reveals her concerns about Nel's decision to marry; but her long journey also brings about a shift of identity in Sula. Rejecting Nel's decision, Sula engages in a self-building project which lasts for the remainder of her life and keeps her away from domestic life and motherhood. Too busy making herself, Sula does not deem it necessary to get married or have children. Maggie Galehouse indicates, "To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood. Her own 'business'—the business of being, of living—is not dictated by family or community" (352). Motherhood is a time-consuming project that requires taking care of others, and caring for and nurturing the other is not on Sula's agenda. Karen F. Stein argues, "While her repudiation of these bonds renders her an outcast in the eyes of her community, she perceives herself as free, and therefore able, as none of the other women are, to be honest and to experience life and self fully. Her journey is the enactment of that freedom" (54). Sula clearly sees marriage as bondage and comes to believe in her total liberty from communal expectations. As a result, Nel's marriage ruins the blurring of the difference between

self and other for both Nel and Sula since while Nel becomes all “other” in her marriage with Jude, Sula becomes fixated on the idea of her own self sufficiency. This self-centeredness is partly accountable for the failure of the friendship.

As the narrator says, Sula is “dangerously free,” and only her own freedom matters. She rejects any form of hindrance to her liberty and does not take into consideration any moral judgment on her. She makes her decisions according to her own wishes, and she violates the rules of the community on purpose. Robert Stepto argues, “Nel believes in all the laws of that community. She *is* the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignores them” (14). For this reason, she does not care about the moral issues involved in her sleeping with her friend’s husband, Jude. She does not feel any shame or regrets and certainly does not understand Nel’s pain because she does not acknowledge any wrongdoing. She grants herself the freedom to sleep with Jude, but denies Nel the freedom to get angry. Nancy Peterson observes, “Neither self nor other takes shape or acquires form in Sula’s experience. Other characters in the novel can control slippage, with forms that set limits to things in time and space. But Sula has no form of keeping anything, and so every slip turns into a dead loss” (51). Yet although Sula is portrayed as rejecting conventional domestic values, the novel suggests that it is because of her upbringing that Sula ends up the way she does.

Indeed, Sula and Nel’s different upbringings may justify the different paths they follow. Sula grows up in a household without men, where her grandmother Eva and her mother, Hannah, entertain men according to their will. She inherits her sexual freedom from these women; as the narrator says, “Hannah’s friendship with women were, of course, seldom and short-lived, and the newly married couples whom her mother took in soon learned what a hazard she was. She could

break up a marriage before it had even become one—she would make love to the new groom and wash his wife’s dishes all in an afternoon” (*Sula* 45). Perhaps this explains why Sula finds it easy to sleep with her best and only friend’s husband without shame or regrets. Despite her damaged childhood relationship with her mother, she looks up to her mother as an example and follows her easy ways: “Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (*Sula* 44). Hannah does not cultivate female friendship because she sleeps with the husbands of the women who are supposed to be her friends. Her immoral behavior represents a threat to female bonding and a blow to female solidarity since she causes women’s pain instead of providing comfort and security. Hooks notes, “Women who are honest with themselves and others do not fear being vulnerable. We do not fear that another woman can expose or unmask us. We do not fear annihilation, for we know no one can destroy our integrity as women who love” (*Communion* 137). Female friendship requires not only honesty with oneself but with others as well, which Hannah fails to demonstrate. She betrays the women around her, including her own daughter, and puts sexual pleasure ahead of female friendship. Describing Sula’s estranged relationship with Nel after the wedding, the narrator explains, “[H]aving had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes, she [Sula] was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to” (*Sula* 119). Sula does not value marriage because she believes in sexual freedom. Therefore, she sees Jude just as an available man like any other man. In effect, however, Sula’s utter rejection of the claims of marriage, inherited from her mother, suggests that patriarchal institutions continue to define her, if only in the negative.



Accustomed to getting whatever she wants, Sula's affair with Jude seems to represent just another whim she wishes to indulge. Sula's first concern is to please herself, and because she associates Nel with her self, she thinks whatever makes her happy also pleases Nel. Reddy argues: "The wish to be Nel is what drives Sula into her sexual experimentation with Jude" (9). The closeness of their past friendship makes her think they are the same. However, after the affair with Jude, in response to Nel's reaction, she soon realizes that self and other are different. The narrator reflects, "She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They had always shared the affection of other people" (*Sula* 119). Nel's reaction surprises Sula because Nel expects her to enjoy the game. Sula's failure to realize the seriousness of the matter constitutes another clue that Sula's own understanding of her past friendship has been altered as a result of her efforts to define herself *in opposition* to conventional marital and domestic models. Talking to Nel during their final clash, she says, "But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A second hand lonely" (*Sula* 143). Sula's perpetual search for self contrasts with Nel's lack of self-awareness, but both are the result of the influence of patriarchal institutions. Answering Eva's complaint that she must have children, Sula says, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (*Sula* 92). This life long project makes her an outcast in her own community and ultimately causes her estrangement from Nel. The latter has been her only support in her constant battle with the community, so their estrangement puts her in total seclusion.<sup>27</sup> The narrator asserts, "Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of *that*. Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew,

who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits. Now Nel was one of *them*” (*Sula* 119-20). Sula, therefore, loses the only friend she ever has. Her journey all around the country after Nel’s wedding teaches her that friends cannot be made overnight: “She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman” (*Sula* 121). She realizes that not everybody can be a friend, but still she jeopardizes the only friendship of her life. Through this portrayal, Morrison compares a male lover to a female friend and pleads for the importance of the latter. *Sula* puts forward female bonding first before romantic love and encourages women to cultivate female friendship, which offers them more security and comfort.

Interestingly, although Sula’s selfish attitude makes her a renegade in a community that both despises and fears her, the community’s reaction to her also emphasizes the need for solidarity and friendship. The community of the Bottom despises Sula because of her immoral behavior; however, it tolerates her status as a witch. For this reason, even though people protect themselves and their children from her, they do not harm her or even throw her out of the community. They respect her membership in the community even if they disapprove of her conduct. Thus, the novel reveals the African American community’s stand about evil, which they acknowledge but do not feel the need to destroy. They see evil as part of the community and therefore strive to find ways and means to escape its wrath without having to throw it away. The narrator states, “Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (*Sula* 117-18). Instead of evicting Sula, the members of the community form bonds and improve their relationship with

one another as a way of protecting themselves from evil. Melvin Dixon observes, "The community tolerates the evil in Sula by not throwing her away, and they ultimately survived it" (102). Sula's battle with the community has been going on for a very long time, and her sleeping with Nel's husband is another challenge to the Bottom which proves her unconventionality. The community does not seek to exile her as Nel does, however, "So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps. But aside from one or two unsuccessful efforts to collect the dust from her footsteps, they did nothing to harm her. As always the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run" (*Sula* 113). By refusing to exile Sula, the community is, in fact, able to improve as a result of Sula's negative influence. Peterson observes, "Identifying Sula as a personification of evil relieves these people of the burden of their own evil and displaces it onto her. She then becomes what they are not, and others are seen in relief against her and distinguished by their difference from her. They can become good because, in their minds, she has become evil" (56). Although superficial, the solidarity that Sula's relationship with the community creates is, after all, a factor causing the improvement of the community. Sula thus becomes the element that urges the community to change its attitude for the best; her presence is somewhat positive since it has a positive impact on people. The Bottom seems to be a passive community that does not initiate actions on its own, so Sula helps its members to achieve another understanding of their lives and their environments. Peterson argues, "As people recognize their absence of relation in that place, they experience firsthand the losses that Sula kept from them. These are primarily [. . .] losses of relation, of any connection between people and the objects they see, any attachment forged by labor or hope or promise. Without such connections, they see things that they hoped for but that never existed" (57). Consequently, Sula's death puts a definite end to these weak attempts at solidarity, but it also stands as a

commentary on Nel's own reaction to her friend's unconventional behavior. Sula's death becomes a final commentary on the need to rethink the relationship between self and other in order to counteract dominant patriarchal institutions.

If Sula's self-building project becomes a lifelong initiative, Nel's lack of self-awareness lasts until her encounter with Eva opens her eyes and leads her to discover the meaning of her past relationship with her friend. Even though Nel seems to be unconscious of her involvement in Chicken Little's death, Eva reminds her of that event she kept secret in her subconscious. The meeting turns out to be vital to Nel, who finally remembers the potentiality of her girlhood friendship with Sula. Through this retrospection, she realizes the mistakes she makes and acquires some level of understanding. Reddy states, "Nel finally does reach self-understanding, and it is Sula who leads her to it; her recognition of her true feelings provides her with that speck around which to grow" (10). Nel, at last, understands that she does not suffer from Jude's departure but from her estrangement from Sula. Through the epiphany Nel says, "'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 was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.' It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (*Sula* 174). Through this cry, Nel mourns the loss of her bonding with Sula, the significance of which she just realizes. She regrets the misunderstanding and differences between them that led to their estrangement. She finally becomes conscious that patriarchal structures are mainly responsible for their downfall, and they are victims. She also finds out that her marriage and Jude caused their estrangement. Even the connection of the three words "girlgirlgirl" is a reflection or a remembrance of her girlhood relationship with Sula and the nurturing and comfort it used to provide them with. The

combination of these words is an image that informs of the intensity of their girlhood friendship, and how she misses those moments. It takes Nel numerous valuable but lost years to realize the potentiality of their bond. All these years she denies herself the company of Sula and refuses to forgive her but instead chooses to stay embittered till the very end. This very long delay in Nel's comprehension nearly compromises her own life because she not only loses her best friend but also her sense of self. All these years, she suffers from Jude's departure not knowing she does not even need him, does not even miss him:

Conventional morality blocks Nel's realization of her own complicity in Chicken Little's Death and her loss of Sula's friendship. Nel enters so fully into the role of the innocent bystander and the abandoned wife, succumbs so totally to the ostensible primacy of the marriage bond and the heterosexual relationship, that for a quarter of a century she is blind to the truth about her own life. (Nissen 271)

Until now, Nel fails to understand that friendship is not about being right or wrong; it requires more comprehension, forgiveness and open-mindedness. Demetrakopoulos argues, "The novel thus suggests the cosmic value in women realizing how much they do love each other, of how much joy and pain they share. But still, at the end Nel is alone; Sula dead; and we see how much of the pain is solitary. Even the realization of loss is often too late for the relationship itself" (90). Although the reconciliation comes too late to save the friendship, it still sends a significant signal of hope. Nel's understanding may help her live an improved life with a better impact on her community. Morrison foregrounds that differences can be worked on and encourages women to lift the obstacles and initiate conversation in time in order to save their friendships.

Even though Morrison encourages women to make a sincere commitment to female friendship, she portrayed failed sisterhoods in both *Sula* and *Love*. As Hudson-Weems states,

As the author has proclaimed, she wanted to write about a profound friendship between two women, and in spite of the complexity of that relationship, which ostensibly appears to be problematic, particularly since Sula has a sexual encounter with her best friend's husband, Jude, the sum total of their experiences since their childhood could be expressed as a metaphor for true genuine sisterhood. (*Africana Womanist* 65)

In *Sula*, patriarchy interferes with female bonding and puts a definite end to it. Although this form of patriarchy is passive because the novel does not portray a strong male figure who oppresses women, it takes the shape of race, class and marriage and endangers women's relationships. Besides, patriarchal influence also urges Sula and Nel to give up the unity between self and other that empowers their friendship. As Betty Jean Parker argues, "Nel has limitations and she doesn't have the imagination that Sula has. [. . .] Yet she and Nel are very much alike. They complement each other. They support each other. I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being" (61). Nel and Sula fail to safeguard the female solidarity they have nurtured for so long, and which kept them strong and united against challenges. Hortense Spillers observes, "In the relationship between Nel and Sula, Morrison demonstrates the female's rites-of- passage in their peculiar richness and impoverishment; the fabric of paradoxes-betrayals and sympathies, silences and aggressions, advances and sudden retreats" (68).

Through the failure of the friendship between Sula and Nel and its causes Morrison shows that female bonding faces various challenges and warns women about the danger and power of patriarchy. Nel and Sula have not been careful enough to avoid this quagmire, and they pay a high price. Bakerman adds, "One of the great attractions of *Sula*, perhaps particularly for female readers, is its examination of a friendship between two women. On the surface, one is a

good woman, Nel, and the other a bad woman, Sula” (41). Morrison does not categorize them as good or bad, but the community certainly does. However, both of them have flaws because if Sula’s self-centeredness is condemnable, Nel’s lack of self-awareness does not help her, either. Through the portrayal of both characters, the reader is able to see the loss of female friendship. Both Sula and Nel stop seeing each other as self or even Cinderella, and while Sula engages in building self, Nel spends her time trying to uplift Jude and therefore becomes too other-focused. Anger, frustration and the willingness to be perceived as a victim prevent Nel from comprehending how much she needs to reconcile with her friend. Sula does not make any attempt at reconciliation either; her self-centeredness and pride will not allow her to do so. Morrison expects her readers to avoid making the same mistakes and not let what happened to Nel and Sula happen to them or their friends. She wants them to draw the conclusions of this failed friendship to safeguard and protect their relationships against patriarchal structures.

## B. *LOVE*

Patriarchy and its different institutions destroy the friendship between Sula and Nel in *Sula*; similarly, the bond between Heed and Christine in *Love* also does not survive the impact of patriarchy. In *Love*, however, Bill Cosey embodies a much more active and oppressive version of patriarchy than that portrayed in *Sula*. Cosey uses his upper-class status to break up the friendship between Christine Cosey and Heed the Night Johnson, blackmailing Heed's parents into letting their eleven-year old daughter marry him. He consciously and maliciously takes advantage of their poverty to exploit them, forcing an underage girl into marriage. Through this

portrayal, Morrison highlights the power of patriarchy and the mechanism of class oppression that make the lower class potential victims of the upper class. As in *Sula*, what is also endangered and finally ruined as a result of this marriage is female friendship.

In *Love*, Morrison chooses a different narrative technique from that of *Sula* by employing a character named L as the narrator. L's extensive use of flashbacks and interruptions and the overall lack of precision and detail in L's storytelling make the story difficult to follow. However, Cosey's patriarchal influence over Christine and Heed is strongly emphasized. Indeed, the novel focuses on the destructive power of patriarchy and shows how its influence not only destroys the girlhood friendship between Christine and Heed but continues to affect them individually long after Cosey's death.

As in *Sula*, marriage is clearly responsible for the destruction of the female bonding in *Love*. As soon as Heed becomes Cosey's wife, she stops being Christine's friend; their friendship transforms into animosity. Yet more clearly than in *Sula*, the patriarchal institution of class is also directly responsible for the failure of the friendship. Unlike Jude, who is very passive, Cosey has the power to manipulate Heed and Christine's lives as he wishes, and he causes them much pain and keeps them deliberately estranged.

Reflecting on the way Cosey blackmailed her parents to get their agreement to the marriage proposal, Heed remembers, "I heard it was two hundred dollars he gave my daddy, and a pocketbook for Mama" (*Love* 189). By marrying an eleven-year-old girl, Cosey becomes a pedophile. Yet through this marriage, Cosey not only abuses Heed but also separates her from her best friend. Cosey does not just marry any ordinary girl; he actually marries the girl his granddaughter has chosen as her closest friend. He selfishly watches as Christine and Heed's friendship breaks up and as they declare war on each other under his own roof since they live in



his house. Cosey's conduct reveals the way he uses authority to dictate his own rules while violating the laws of the community.

In *Love*, the connection between class oppression and the damaging effects of marriage on women are rendered more explicit than in *Sula*. Even those victimized by Cosey must agree with him because his wealth grants him enough power to silence any voice that may be tempted to challenge him. As a result, the community becomes an accomplice to child abuse because it fails to protect an innocent child.

Despite the economic situation, the well being of Heed should come first for her family, but in accepting Cosey's deal, they turn their backs on their most significant responsibility, "*That trash gave her up like they would a puppy*" (*Love* 105). Heed's family demonstrates that they value money more than their daughter, using the marriage as a desperate attempt for them to get out of poverty. Thinking that Cosey will keep on giving them money or favors, they agree to sacrifice Heed but soon discover that Cosey will not give them anything once the marriage is set. In fact, Cosey does not even allow them to attend their own daughter's wedding: "A ceremony unobserved by Heed's own family because, other than Solitude and Righteous Morning, none of her family was allowed to attend. The given excuse was that they were still mourning the death of Joy and Welcome" (*Love* 76). This humiliation and lack of consideration reveal how Cosey is able to manipulate and control those among the lower classes, and how marriage serves as a tool in that manipulation. In addition, the sacrifice of Heed to Cosey's desires attests to the estranged mother-daughter relationship that was also a focus in *Sula*. Like Nel and Sula, Heed and Christine are left to themselves because their mothers do not have time for them. This lack of mother care makes them more vulnerable and explains why they form bonds in order to compensate for this gap. The novels highlight how problematic mother-daughter relationships

impact each of these girls and cause them much pain. Heed confesses her awareness of her lack of mother-love in a discussion with Junior,<sup>28</sup> one of Heed's assistants and another character who suffers from a strained mother-daughter relationship. Explaining to Heed her experience, the latter readily empathizes, "And my mother didn't care a thing about me / Mine, neither" (*Love* 129).

Perhaps because of this failed parenting, Heed comes to regard Cosey as both a husband and father-figure, cementing his patriarchal role in her mind. After the marriage, Cosey prevents Heed from visiting her parents, keeping her in total seclusion from the world; but she soon comes to prefer luxury to her poverty-stricken home. "All she needed was him, which was lucky because he was all she had" (*Love* 77). As the narrator tells us, she stays because she enjoys the gifts he buys her, even though she later reflects, "For a few years he was good to me. Mind you, at eleven I thought a box of candied popcorn was good treatment" (*Love* 186). Ultimately, Heed chooses to stay with a man old enough to be her grandfather even after she has had the opportunity to grow and reflect critically on her life. Heed's attitude reveals that although she advances in years, she is still not mature; she has never made a decision of her own in her life but just follows as directed. The marriage does not help her grow and develop an identity of her own. Even late in her life, she is still an eleven-year old girl married to an old man. Refusing to reconcile with Christine, Heed ends up following in her family's footsteps, trading friendship for money.

Meanwhile, Christine also fails to see that it is Cosey and what he represents of the patriarchal institutions of marriage and class that destroy her friendship with Heed. Surprised by the marriage between her grandfather and her best friend, Christine does not understand what is happening around her and, powerless against her grandfather directs all her frustration at Heed

for accepting the marriage proposal. However, even when she finally comprehends the reasons for Heed's acceptance, Christine cannot stop regarding her old friend as an enemy. The narrator states, "Like friendship, hatred needed more than physical intimacy; it wanted creativity and hard work to sustain itself" (*Love* 74). Holding her friend responsible for the marriage, Christine devotes the rest of her life to making Heed pay for marrying her grandfather. She reflects, "My grandfather married her when she was eleven. We were best friends. One day we built castles on the beach; next day he sat her in his lap. One day we were playing house under a quilt; next day she slept in his bed. One day we played jacks; the next she was fucking my grandfather. [. . .] One day this house was mine; next day she owned it" (*Love* 132-33). This bitter reflection motivates Christine's anger and reveals her sense of betrayal. She fails to acknowledge that Cosey and Heed's parents orchestrate a deal and that her friend is just an object in their hands. Although, at first, Christine and Heed are too young to comprehend what is happening to them, Christine's anger and betrayal prevent her from feeling any sympathy or pity for Heed even much later in life, revealing the same lack of maturity exhibited in Heed. Christine remarks, "To have your best and only friend leave the squealing splash in your bathtub, trade the stories made up and whispered beneath sheets in your bed for a dark room at the end of the hall reeking of liquor and an old man's business, doing things no one would describe but were so terrible no one could ignore them. She would not forget that. Why should she? It changed her life" (*Love* 133). Fighting her friend seems to be easier for Christine than fighting Cosey, especially since Christine hopes to inherit one day her grandfather's fortune. More than anything else, it is this struggle over Cosey's wealth that ultimately prevents any reconciliation between Christine and Heed. Both women would rather mourn the loss of a friend than an inheritance—a fact that shows how wealth and class work to erode the possibilities of female solidarity in *Love*.

In the ongoing battle to secure Cosey's property, patriarchy ends up oppressing Christine and Heed long after Cosey's death. When Cosey fails to write a proper will, Christine feels robbed of her inheritance and engages in a legal battle in order to recuperate what Heed regards as her own. This battle transforms Cosey's initial manipulations to secure Heed as his wife into a lifelong struggle between Heed and Christine. As Megan Sweeney observes,

Cosey's action pits against each other his granddaughter, Christine, and her best friend, Heed the Night, leading them to engage in a better, life-long competition, first for Cosey's attention, and then later-due to the ambiguous phrasing of Cosey's only known will, allegedly scrawled on a restaurant menu from the hotel-for the inheritance of his private home at One Monarch Street. (463)

Orphaned, Christine has nowhere else to go and therefore comes to live with her next of kin but also enemy, Heed. Surprisingly, the latter lets her stay because she suffers from arthritis and needs company. This silent deal is the only agreement between them and it respects their individual interests; however, it does not keep them from fighting. The narrator observes, "Along with age, recognition that neither one could leave played a part in their unnegotiated cease-fire. More on the mark was their unspoken realization that the fights did nothing other than allow them to hold each other" (*Love* 74). Both women lose a great deal of time feeding their hatred and grow old without giving themselves a chance to reconcile. They both fail to realize, even in their sixties, that Cosey is the person responsible for their problems.

In the end, the emptiness<sup>29</sup> of Cosey's house reflects the emptiness in their lives since Cosey, even though dead twenty-five years, remains at the center of their relationship, holding them apart. Heed and Christine do not have the chance to revive their friendship because they fail to overcome patriarchy in time. Through this delay in the girls' awareness, Morrison

demonstrates how patriarchy represents a threat to female friendship. If the epiphany in *Sula* occurs twenty-five years after Sula's death, Christine and Heed's understanding happens more than twenty-five years after Cosey's. Even long after the perpetrator of their oppression dies, they continue to suffer from patriarchal oppression through his property.

When reconciliation finally comes for Christine and Heed, it happens under dire circumstances and too late to save the friendship. In fact, reconciliation occurs on the battleground where each plans the destruction of the other, Heed dies after the brutal confrontation she has with Christine while trying to write another will to confirm herself as heiress. Suspecting her trick, Christine follows her to the ruins of Cosey's hotel, and there they fight for the last time of their lives. The moment that follows this physical confrontation brings partial reconciliation and the revelation that, for the first time since Heed's marriage, they understand Cosey's responsibility for their estrangement. Christine reflects, "We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere" (*Love* 189). But this important realization comes far too late to make up for the many years they have spent fighting over Cosey, "He took all my childhood away from me, girl / He took all of you away from me" (*Love* 194). Realizing their mistakes, they understand that they cannot regain the lost time, and they decide to enjoy the last moments of their time together trying to clear the misunderstandings between them. Christine acknowledges, "Hating you was the only thing my mother liked about me" (*Love* 189). As a result, they enjoy a brief moment of friendship, but Heed dies shortly after, leaving Christine alone. As in *Sula* Morrison describes a moment of reconciliation that comes too late to save the friendship between these women. Morrison dramatizes the possibility of clearing up difference, but these novels also make clear that time is limited. hooks explains, "Sisterhood wasn't just about what we shared in common—things like

periods, obsessive concern with our looks, or bitching about men—it was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity, not just when we have complaints or when we feel victimized” (*Communion* 130). hooks calls for a sisterhood that transcends differences, regardless of the circumstances Morrison’s novels suggest that living under the sway of patriarchal institutions can halt, delay or prevent such sisterhood.

Although Morrison is a devout supporter of female friendship, she fails to provide a true example of a successful sisterhood in all her novels. From *The Bluest Eye* to *Love* Morrison describes failed female friendships and presents them as a warning about the power of patriarchal structures. In both *Sula* and *Love*, patriarchy disintegrates and breaks up female friendship, leaving women totally estranged from one another.

The friendship between Sula and Nel allows them to develop identities during their girlhood by blurring conventional boundaries between self and other; however, patriarchal influences disintegrate this new understanding of female solidarity. Their friendship offers them nurturing and support, but it fails to overcome patriarchy and finally fails. Even though racial solidarity was initiated to fight racial oppression, it fails in *Sula* since patriarchy simply overpowers it. Morrison presents a community that is not strong enough to develop racial solidarity, a fact that also leads to the failure of female solidarity. In fact, in *Sula* the community at large seeks more to fight Sula’s unconventionality than direct patriarchal oppression. Even the so-called solidarity the community designs against Sula fades away as soon as she dies, and the spontaneous and unorganized demonstration against the racist hiring politics lead many members only to death in the tunnel.

Although Morrison portrays failed friendships in both *Sula* and *Love*, the latter does not present the same emotional and psychological complexities as the former. Indeed, Sula and Nel’s

relationship seems to be more intense and dramatic than Heed and Christine's. However, *Love* emphasizes the way patriarchal structures impact the girlhood friendship of Christine and Heed and finally destroys it. Through Cosey's influence, they both suffer from patriarchal oppression that causes the failure of their bond and keeps them estranged. Unlike Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, in which female friendship challenges and overcomes patriarchy, Morrison's *Sula* and *Love* portray drastic failures of female bonding. However, although Morrison acknowledges the power of patriarchal institutions, she also highlights the healing power of female friendship that may heal the wounds resulting from the impact of race and class. Thus, she conveys a similar message as Bâ and Atta; they just choose different ways to present it. While Morrison describes the failure of female bonding in order to foreground the power of patriarchal structures, Bâ and Atta highlight the healing power of female friendship that allows women to overcome patriarchy.

PART II FEMALE SOLIDARITY IN MARIAMA BÂ' S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND SEFI  
 ATTA' S *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME*

CHAPTER 3. SISTERHOOD IN *SO LONG A LETTER*

Mariama Bâ was a female writer who made a great contribution to African literature. A well-known novelist from Senegal, she wrote *So Long a Letter*, a contemporary novel that drew the attention of many critics. The book has received international recognition because of the way

it foregrounds female subjugation. Through this portrayal, Bâ brings awareness to the plight of Senegalese women who face patriarchal constraints and who struggle to overcome them. Belonging to the first generation of African women who benefited from Western education,<sup>30</sup> she had the privilege of receiving an education during an era in which boys were encouraged to attend school whereas girls were expected to stay home, help their mothers in the kitchen, and remain illiterate. Bâ and many other intellectuals took charge and participated in the effort of nation building, each in his or her field of activity. As a teacher, she trained Senegalese youth and prepared them for a better future. In addition, her commitment to the women's organizations such as *Les Soeurs Optimistes Internationales*<sup>31</sup> demonstrated how she cared about women. Through these associations, Bâ constantly fought for the improvement of women's conditions and against the injustices daily perpetrated on women, the same pain and suffering she describes in *So Long a Letter*.

Senegal, the country that provides the setting for *So Long a Letter*, became independent from French colonial rule in 1960. Split between tradition and modernity, the country strives to preserve its cultural values, which are deeply threatened by the intrusion of Western culture. Long before the arrival of white colonialists on the coast of Africa, Senegal had undergone an Arab invasion<sup>32</sup> which resulted in the integration of the Islamic faith. Indeed, 95% of the Senegalese population is Muslim and that explains the predominance of polygamy, a practice that allows men the right to have up to four wives if they can treat them all equally. Although it is believed that polygamy existed in traditional Africa before the Arab invasion, Islam makes it more conventional through its law. This situation explains the expansion of polygamy in Senegal, where the need to have many children that can help work the land finds an approval in this opportunity for men to have multiple wives. Polygamy as a patriarchal institution oppresses



women and causes much pain and suffering, a reality Bâ portrays through the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, the protagonists. However, although polygamy is still rampant in Senegal, more women have started to challenge the system by questioning its foundation. In fact, some educated women denounce the injustice and oppression that polygamy imposes on women and reject the practice.

Bâ describes the plight of Senegalese women through both the content and form of the novel. *So Long a Letter* is an epistolary novel that presents a letter Ramatoulaye is writing to her friend Aissatou. Through the epistolary form of the novel, Bâ foregrounds the female friendship since the correspondence between the two women and the issue of female empowerment it reveals attest to the closeness of the protagonists' relationship. The form also reinforces the confusion about the actual addressee of the letter. Some critics argue that Ramatoulaye may be writing to herself in order to alleviate the loneliness and pain of her seclusion,<sup>33</sup> especially since the letter will not be mailed. Ramatoulaye spent the whole period of her widowhood writing a letter to her friend in which she describes the joys and sorrows of their lives. In fact, talking to Aissatou, the narrator seems to be talking to herself not only because they share the same memories and experiences but also because she feels the need to reflect on the issues bothering them. On the other hand, some critics say that the letter is dependent upon an addressee other than Ramatoulaye herself. This epistolary form serves to express their bonding and reveals the intensity of the relationship. Mary Jane Androne asserts,

in her letter—the most intimate and personal form of correspondence—to her closest friend, Ramatoulaye bares her soul and divulges her innermost concerns, worries and beliefs. The confiding tone in many instances in this letter suggests the trust that exists

between writer and recipient and this carries over to the reader who often feels as if she is overhearing a private monologue. (38)

The recollection of their shared memories makes it easy for Ramatoulaye to overcome the four months and ten days of seclusion Islam requires of widows. The narration of both their stories keeps her busy and gives her an opportunity to address her friend as if she were talking to her physically. The letter reduces the distance between them and establishes communication.

Christina Abuk reflects, “Whilst the act of communication reveals the personal changes and experiential gaps that result from the two friends’ separation, the effect of the long-letter structure is to convey a sense of unbroken unity and communication between them” (727). The writing of this letter gives the narrator an opportunity to share the story about her ordeals with her friend. An epistolary form requires a confidant, and Ramatoulaye finds one in Aissatou.

According to Coulis, “The question of genre might be explained by double coding or, in Bâ’s work, multi-or plural coding. While Ramatoulaye speaks ostensibly to Aissatou, her narrative includes messages to her Senegalese sisters, brothers, children, other postcolonial societies, former imperial powers, not to mention the chapter which speaks directly to Modou, her late husband” (28). The question surrounding the genre of Bâ’s book gives way to many speculations. Whether regarded as a letter, a diary or an autobiography, the form draws much attention. Because the narrative does not match the author’s life and does not record the events daily, it seems to be a letter even though it will not be mailed. Whatever genre you choose to name this narrative, it conveys Bâ’s message properly and allows her to highlight female solidarity.

The main points Bâ describes in *So Long a Letter* pinpoint the healing powers of female friendship. Women’s relationships allow them to fight polygamy, colonialism, the caste system

and any form of prejudice. Indeed, Bâ emphasizes the way female friendship, through mutual support and sincere commitment, helps women overcome any attempt at subjugation and heals the pain resulting from oppression. Consequently, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye succeed in extending their bonds into a type of female solidarity that reaches more women and that even contributes to nation building. Bâ's protagonists also gain female empowerment and build new identities that allow them to survive their husbands' betrayal and assume their new lives as single mothers. Their belief in education grants them the status of professional women in a context where most women remain at home, and their struggle over women's liberation secures their own freedom and that of their community as well.

In the process, Bâ clearly reveals the pain and suffering women experience through polygamy in *So Long a Letter*. She portrays polygamy as an agent of patriarchy that keeps women oppressed through the daily injustices perpetrated on them. The two friends and protagonists of the novel, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, have both known the discomfort of polygamy and undergone its dire consequences. Indeed, after many years of happy marriage and the birth of three sons, Aissatou's husband, Mawdo Bâ, takes a second wife to honor his mother's demand. Unhappy with the social background of her daughter-in-law, Aunty Nabou, Mawdo's mother, urges her son to marry a woman of his own class. Aissatou refuses to share her husband with another woman and condemns Mawdo for his weakness toward his mother, who urges him to marry his cousin. She chooses divorce over polygamy and writes in a note she leaves for Mawdo, "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (*So Long* 32). Her difficult decision to leave and start a new life results from her determination to fight polygamy in all its forms and a desire to claim her independence. She considers her husband's acceptance of Young Nabou as a second wife to be a

denial of the commitment they made to each other many years ago. Feeling betrayed, she refuses to get involved in polygamy and prefers divorce, despite the difficulty of single parenting. Her friend, Ramatoulaye, understands and accepts her decision and even encourages Aissatou to assume her new responsibility. This support has been very important to Aissatou, who finds the courage and strength to face the challenges. She, in fact, needs all the assistance she can get facing this patriarchal institution that breaks her marriage and transforms her into a single parent. Aissatou's choice to leave her husband and raise her three children alone conflicts with Senegalese custom and tradition, which require women to be obedient and to be ready to welcome co-wives openly. Bâ foregrounds the Senegalese custom that urges its citizens to share almost everything, which applies even to the conjugal life, since women learn very early all the aspects of polygamy and know that they may have to share their husband with another wife or more. Aissatou's decision is unique, and she faces severe criticism and judgment from the community, which does not approve of her stand. Western education plays a key role in her choice and offers her the opportunity to embrace the concept of monogamy and therefore reject culturally accepted polygamy. Abuk claims, "Their rejection of polygamy is based on the enduring Western ideal that the only acceptable marriage is monogamous marriage for true love. They are the first generation of Muslim Senegalese women for whom such a rationale would be imaginable" (735). As an educated woman, Aissatou dares to challenge institutionalized polygamy and finds her way through the painful experience of single parenting.

Although Ramatoulaye's mentoring and counseling help her friend Aissatou recover from her predicament, Ramatoulaye finds herself in need of support when she goes through an experience that is almost the same or even worse. Indeed, Aissatou shows compassion and dependability when Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, also takes a second wife, who happens

to be the friend and classmate of their daughter, Daba. Ramatoulaye complains, “Binetou, a child the same age as my daughter Daba, promoted to the rank of my co-wife, whom I must face up to” (*So Long* 39). Unlike his friend Mawdo, who wanted to accommodate both of his wives had Aissatou accepted his second marriage, Modou makes the dramatic decision to leave Ramatoulaye and her twelve children behind after twenty-five years of marriage. This move severely affects Ramatoulaye, who feels betrayed and abandoned. Surprised by Modou’s attitude, she does not understand his decision to marry a second wife, especially Binetou, her daughter’s classmate. The betrayal and deception grow considerably when she gradually realizes that her husband is not even coming back to give her an explanation. Then her anger becomes bitterness because after the frustration of the beginning, as a devout Muslim, she was prepared to accept polygamy according to the precepts of Islam only to discover that Modou does not even give her a choice. She reflects, “I lived in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends and family to bring him back to the fold proved futile. [ . . . ] He never came again; his new found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us” (*So Long* 46). His decision to abandon Ramatoulaye and her children altogether for the sake of a new and younger wife saddens Ramatoulaye and transforms her into head of household and single mother overnight. Unlike Aissatou, she does not choose such status and would indeed have tolerated polygamy had her husband decided to stay with her. “I had the solution my children wanted - the break without having taken the initiative” (*So Long* 52). Modou’s departure urges Ramatoulaye to take charge since she has to fill in the gap he left.

As Ramatoulaye helps Aissatou go through her painful experience, Aissatou also shows a tremendous support to her friend throughout her ordeal even though they have different answers to the question of polygamy. Because she understands her friend’s predicament, Aissatou

completely empathizes with her situation, thereby helping her overcome this challenge. The narrator sums up the events as follows: “Your disappointment was mine, as my rejection was yours” (*So Long* 55). The two friends have both suffered deception and betrayal from husbands to whom they were married for a long time. However, they adopt different attitudes toward their misfortunes. While Aissatou moves forward and starts a new life as a single mother, Ramatoulaye prepares herself to accept polygamy. Coulis observes, “Aissatou has known the same betrayal as her friend. And yet, she, unlike Ramatoulaye who chose to stay and remain a co-wife, refuses to accept the situation and leaves. She will not accept the othering by her husband, or his attempt at colonizing her and their children” (31). Aissatou takes Mawdo’s betrayal seriously and refuses to forgive or forget; she prefers divorce and takes full responsibility of herself and her children. This decision is very courageous and actually rare in a society where polygamy constitutes the rule and not the exception. Ramatoulaye’s decision to stay comes from her beliefs in marriage. She deeply believes that a woman needs a man in order to be accomplished: “I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage” (*So Long* 56). She insists on the complementary between men and women. Her ideals about marriage have been shattered by her husband’s decision to leave her, but she would not take the first step, despite her children’s wishes. Furthermore, even though Ramatoulaye accepts a co-wife, she refuses to become a second wife to Daouda Dieng,<sup>34</sup> a former suitor who renews his marriage proposal to her after the death of her husband, partly because she does not want to harm his wife. She reflects, “Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between

you and your family” (*So Long* 68). She refuses because she understands the pain and suffering associated with polygamy and does not wish to impose such a plight on anybody.

Through the different approaches that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have toward polygamy, Bâ demonstrates that women’s differences should not be an obstacle to female friendship. She invites women to consider their differences as positive elements that call more for unity than division. The close friendship of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye allows them to tolerate differences. These differences have never endangered their relationship because what unites them is stronger than those clashes of opinion. The mutual respect they have for one another and their open-mindedness allow them to support each other, whatever the circumstances. Coulis argues,

Even though Ramatoulaye and Aissatou choose different responses to the attempt to subjugate them, they retain a friendship and respect that endures. Their bond transcends distance and all differences and is the core of the narrative. Being unclassified or unclassifiable by genre, *So Long a Letter* seems a metaphor for the sisterhood

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou forged in childhood, modified throughout many years together and apart, and continues to offer sustenance and support to them both. (32)

Their different answers to polygamy only reflect their different stands on women’s issues; while Aissatou regards polygamy as an injustice to fight, Ramatoulaye sees it as a burden society imposes on her with which she has to cope. However, their ability to handle this divergence of opinion demonstrates the strength of their friendship. This situation shows that differences do not always destroy female bonding; they can be cleared, and sometimes they are not even an issue.

Commenting on Buchi Emecheta and Bâ, Dubek states,

Both these novelists persuasively argue against the belief that such differences between women’s experiences constitute overwhelming, insurmountable obstacles to building

female bonds. Their novels make clear that the physical and psychic survival of individual women depends on our ability to foster supportive female communities that find strength in cultural difference while working actively to eradicate the differences in power that separate one woman from another. (218)

Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* also raises the issue of female friendship and asserts how building communities can be vital to women's survival.

Class division may also explain the different choices the friends make. Aware of the status the society reserves her as a goldsmith's daughter,<sup>35</sup> Aissatou rebels against polygamy in the same way she rejects social classification. Through her marriage with the prince Mawdo, she challenges the system that prevents unions between men and women of different caste. But when she thinks she has overcome the obstacle of class, another challenge surges and urges her to divorce her husband after many years. However, even the divorce is a form of revolt against not only the institution of polygamy but also against the society that advocates it. Ramatoulaye does not face the caste problem, which may explain her stand about polygamy. Abuk reflects, "The different responses of the friends to marital betrayal are largely determined by contrasts in their social position. It is significant that Aissatou, of working-class origins, is not constrained as Ramatoulaye is: when she strips herself of a betrayed commitment, her choice of naked vulnerability is in striking contrast to Ramatoulaye's enclosed view" (736). Aissatou has nothing to lose in leaving Mawdo since the community does not tolerate a marriage between a "noble" and a goldsmith and therefore expects a failure. This makes her choice easier. Ramatoulaye does not follow her friend's example, which may prove to be more challenging to her not only because of her social status but also because of her twelve children. Aissatou's three children are far easier to handle, and for once her low class status helps and participates in her liberation.



Besides, Aissatou's expatriation to the U.S. helps her escape the caste system in Senegal because she becomes less exposed to the community's demands. Ramatoulaye's ability to treat Aissatou equally despite her low class status makes their bonding possible and keeps it alive. She refuses to adhere to the community's class division that assigns people ranks according to their lineage and dictates who is noble and who is not regardless of their achievement in the society. Ramatoulaye's acceptance of Aissatou reinforces the latter and restores her dignity after Aunt Nabou's open rejection of her. The friendship heals this painful and humiliating experience and arms her with courage that allows her to face her destiny. Bâ criticizes the Senegalese caste system that causes much division and weakens the country because those whom society considers "noble" refuse to bond or marry the less fortunate low caste. This unjust and belittling categorization frustrates and revolts Aissatou, who finds herself victim of the situation. Writing to Mawdo, she says, "Princes master their feelings to fulfil their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppress them" (*So Long* 31). In accepting the marriage orchestrated by his mother, Mawdo indirectly joins his mother in an attempt to purify himself from the humiliation of marrying a low caste goldsmith. Aissatou manages to live through Aunt Nabou's rejection and scorn of her, but she will not allow Mawdo to violate her dignity and minimize her.

Despite these challenges, the support and comfort Aissatou and Ramatoulaye provide each other help them overcome and demonstrate the healing powers of female friendship. The two protagonists devote themselves entirely to each other, nurture, care for one another and succeed in keeping their relationship strong. Their commitment to each other and their refusal to be subjugated help them escape the patriarchal structures that attempt to oppress them. Through the portrayal of this strong form of female bonding, Bâ exposes the advantages of female

friendship and invites women to follow the example of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Each of them survives the painful experiences she has been through and therefore becomes an inspiration to other women who may live through similar situations. Their achievement may have an impact on entire communities and spread the word about female solidarity. Bâ's novel shows the impact of female bonding in women's lives, and how it brings positive changes in their attitude and environment; each shares the other's decisions and endeavors as they build a strong sisterhood. The two friends in *So Long a Letter* give a perfect example of what female friendship should be; their relationship defies time as their bonding starts in their childhood and continues deeper and stronger in their middle age life. The narrator states,

Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the Koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before. (*So Long* 1)

Their reliance on each other, their mutual trust and dependability nourish their friendship. This multi-generational relationship—their grandmothers and aunts were friends before them—has been preserved because of their respect of the basic principles of friendship. Through this bonding, Bâ's novel gives hope to those who believe in the necessity of female solidarity and who work hard in their attempts to build a strong sisterhood. It argues against those who think women incapable of building serious friendship and who see female solidarity as utopia or as a highly feminist project. Hudson-Weems sees *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on womanism mainly because of the novel's focus on female friendship. Aissatou and

Ramatoulaye's struggle to define and develop new selves makes them stronger and allows them to survive their predicaments. Ann McElanie-Johnson notes, "Both the closeness of this relationship and its healing powers become basic to the thematic texture of this novel of female friendship" (114-15). Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's empowering relationship is an inspiring example that may impact the lives of many people.

Besides highlighting female solidarity, Bâ also uses the examples of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye to show that women can fight and overcome patriarchal oppression if they are materially independent. Her novel encourages women to find ways and means to free themselves from financial dependence that keeps them in formal bondage. The protagonists' move to get remunerated jobs contrasts with the reality of the Senegalese society where men are encouraged to seek professional success whereas women expect to get husbands and raise families. They both become teachers, professional women with salaries and who can take care of themselves. Aissatou succeeds as a single mother because she strives to reach a stable financial situation that allows her to provide for herself and her children without expecting any external help. Her divorce prompts her to choose another career as a translator, which provides her with a better opportunity to face her expenses compared to her former job as an elementary school teacher. Realizing the difficulty of her task, she very soon starts looking for a suitable solution that allows her to meet her expectations. Similarly, Ramatoulaye's salary as a schoolteacher sustains her twelve children when her husband abandons her and then dies. The economic freedom of the friends saves them humiliation and more suffering when they face situations that require self-sufficiency. Abuk reflects, "By rooting her text in the artifacts, routines and material concerns of a world of women, Bâ implies that their material dependence or independence is the key determinant of the social justice and equality they are accorded" (727). Bâ's novel offers

professionalism and paid labor as a solution to women's oppression and abuse because it brings material freedom; however, the first step is education, which leads to that opportunity. As pioneers of educated African women, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's success set the example for their generation and those that will follow that women can be both providers for their family and mothers. There is no contradiction between the two roles; they actually complement each other because the working mother can secure the material needs of her children and at the same time offer emotional and nurturing support. As Dubek observes, "Education's effect of raising female expectations has been critical to the subject formation of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Their hopes have been shaped by ideologies of individualism and romanticism. Both are acting in self-interest in seeking this social model, which promises them comparative wealth and power" (211). Neither Ramatoulaye nor Aissatou hesitates to take advantage of such opportunity, which liberates them from financial dependence. They thus set another example of empowerment, which provides women with economic freedom.

Through education, colonialism has another impact on Aissatou and Ramatoulaye. They both go to colonial school and abandon the Koranic school they used to attend. Although both schools are foreign to Senegalese culture, the second is deeply embedded in the tradition because Senegal has embraced Islam many centuries before the beginning of colonialism. School gives the protagonists an opportunity to consolidate their friendship started long before they attend Koranic school. Although Western education is a way toward women's liberation, it also creates ideological changes that make it hard for the friends to cope with their traditional values. Aissatou's rejection of polygamy and caste prejudice, for example, is caused by the influence of her Western education. Abuk states, "Colonial education has revolutionized the lives and minds of *SLAL*'s two friends, turning them into upper-class matrons – professional, widely read" (730).

Western education interferes with the class system in Senegal and grants the educated elites a middle class status. In fact, both Aissatou and Ramatoulaye and their respective husbands Mawdo and Modou belong to the middle class regardless of their rank in the society. However, the conservatives in the novel like Aunt Nabou do not acknowledge this new social stratification and still cling to the old rules. Abuk adds, “Actually, despite Aissatou’s lower class status in the Senegalese caste system, education promulgates her to the middle class; in the same way, Ramatoulaye enjoys a bourgeois life with servants and outings” (731). Thus, despite the patriarchal attempts to subjugate women, education offers them an opportunity to liberate themselves. Ramatoulaye pays tribute to their headmistress for introducing them to school and encouraging them to stay. A form of sisterhood grows between the girls and their headmistress who cares for their future and teaches them how to be independent. This white woman cares more for female solidarity and the need to emancipate these girls than the concerns of colonialism. Ramatoulaye also remembers the multitude of girls from different countries who used to attend the school in Dakar, <sup>36</sup>and she praises the solidarity between them: “a fruitful blend of different intellectuals, characters, manners and customs. [. . .] Friendships were made that have endured the test of time and distance. We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation” (*So Long* 15). The headmistress trains many African women to liberate themselves from the burden of patriarchal oppression and nourish the dream of sisterhood. All these girls have the same goals: to make change for themselves and their society through education. Their success will not only empower them but also contribute to nation building because their achievement also has an impact on the development of their countries. The headmistress’ goal goes beyond female friendship and reaches female solidarity since these girls represent different nations and cultures, but they all enjoy the same seeds of liberation. The

female friendship between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye expands into female solidarity that goes beyond national boundaries. As the examples of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou illustrate, education can not only provide freedom but also offer a good opportunity for female solidarity.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's experiences through colonization, independence and neo-colonialism teach them how to cope with the various changes going on in the country as Senegal attempts to get to its feet. As patriarchal structures, the above-mentioned agents participate in keeping women in bondage. After many centuries of colonization, Africa gets its emancipation from colonial rule. This liberation parallels the protagonists' struggle for emancipation. However, independence does not liberate them from the various forms of oppression they are experiencing. Indeed, neo-colonialism creates new challenges for Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, who face new realities. Obviously, these transformations impact their lives since they face the daily struggle between traditional beliefs and modern Western values. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye have challenged some aspects of their traditions like polygamy and caste prejudice, but they have also refused to be alienated from their community through the influence of colonialism. As Patricia Schulster indicates, "While *So Long a Letter* focuses specifically on Senegalese society and on the Islamic patriarchy that controls women's lives, by extension, it also makes a statement about the movement from colonization to independence that all of Africa has faced because of imperialism" (366). Bâ's novel does not call for a total rejection of traditional values but invites women to make careful choices and question some aspects that may oppress them. Facing the double burden of colonialism and traditional rules, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou survive because their friendship helps them face various challenges. Coulis observes,

While the other female characters are hurt and perplexed by their seemingly powerless situations and remain ignorant of the causes, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are particularly

wounded: they are both fully aware of the workings of double colonization. They have been educated in the French rule and recognize that they have again been colonized, this time by patriarchal authority in the guise of religious custom. (30)

Although colonialism offers the friends the opportunity to challenge patriarchal oppression because their education brings an awareness that encourages them to fight back, it also keeps them in bondage. Indeed, colonialism calls for a rejection of traditional values, posing the threat of cultural alienation. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, indeed, put some of their traditional beliefs aside and embrace some Western values. This clash between modernity and tradition draws the attention of Bâ, who encourages African people in general and Senegalese in particular to find the right balance between the two cultures. Coulis claims, “Aissatou’s stance sums up her refusal to be personally colonized by patriarchal ideology through Muslim custom” (31). Ramatoulaye and Aissatou seem to have found the appropriate solution, which allows them to benefit from both cultures equally, but most importantly they succeed in keeping their friendship that strengthens them throughout the years.

Moreover, although both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have undergone the impact of colonialism, Ramatoulaye is still more traditional because she lives within the Senegalese society whose rules dictate her daily conduct, whereas Aissatou’s displacement exposes her more to Western culture. Keith L. Walker asserts, “The move to colonial independence also involves a shift in the identity of the colonized subject” (251). This shift in identity explains how far the subject is willing to embrace the culture of the colonizer. Ramatoulaye’s deep respect for African traditional values makes her tolerate polygamy even though she realizes the difficulty of such sacrifice. She chooses to suffer personally rather than reject a profoundly rooted custom. Living in New York, Aissatou has no direct contact with the Senegalese community and has the

freedom to choose more independent principles. Dubek reflects, “The enduring friendship between the Westernized Aissatou and the traditional Ramatoulaye affirms that different cultural mores can co-exist. The challenge facing a modernizing Senegal is exactly how to negotiate a union of two such diverse cultures without destroying the integrity of either one” (212). Neither distance nor the different cultures endanger the friendship, which keeps growing. The displacement does not totally transform Aissatou, who still does not forget her friend or her identity even though she has embraced some aspects of modernity. Aissatou’s displacement results from her constant fight against patriarchal oppression. Both Aissatou and Ramatoulaye strive hard to build themselves new identities. They challenge traditional barriers, Islamic rules and colonial chains, and they define themselves according to their own understanding. Schulster observes,

Although Aissatou left and discovered her own, very different life, she had to step outside of her environment, her family, and her traditional roles to do so. She became a sort of exile. On the other hand, Ramatoulaye remained a sort of outcast in her own home [ . . . ] Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, like the colonized of the many countries of Africa, have found freedom by remembering, finding, and developing their true selves. They have broken the fetters of oppression and falsehood to emerge in a new day fashioned entirely on their own terms. (369-70)

Through Aissatou and Ramatoulaye’s friendship, Bâ shows that differences can be positive and actually contribute to the success of relationships because each part brings something, thereby calling for the complementary nature of the bonding. Through this conflict Bâ’s novel foregrounds the complex dilemma of colonized people. Torn between the desire to preserve their culture and the temptation to adopt modernity, African people in general and Senegalese in



particular have a difficult choice to make. As Aissatou and Ramatoulaye develop and transform their friendship into female solidarity, their relationship reaches a new stage that allows them to survive.

*So Long a Letter* describes not only the oppression of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, but also the oppression of the Senegalese women in general who face various challenges related to neocolonialism, tradition or religion. The portrayal goes beyond the boundaries of Senegal and extends to women all around the world. Indeed, the pain described in the novel concerns all women who live a similar situation in Africa and elsewhere. Discussing Bâ, Sehulster states that: “her tale does much more than narrate the story of oppression of a few female characters or of the African female race; it reveals instead the process of colonization and the move toward independence of all of the African nations once subjected to colonial rule” (367). Indeed, almost all African countries have experienced colonialism and neo-colonialism, and women mainly suffer from the same patriarchal constraints. Thus, through *So Long a Letter*, Bâ denounces the injustice perpetrated against women everywhere. This situation shows the precarious conditions of women who still have to fight to liberate themselves from subjugation. As female friendship extends to female solidarity, the suffering of Senegalese women reflects the pain of all women regardless of national origin. In an interview, Bâ explains,

Naturally, because this book often described as a “cry from the heart,” is indeed a cry from the heart of all women everywhere. It is first a cry from the heart of the Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, women constrained by religion and other social constraints that weigh them down. But, it is also a cry that can symbolize the cry of woman everywhere. (Harrell-Bond 396-97)

Despite the different experiences of women, and the forms of oppression under which they suffer, their status as victims puts them in the same category: “Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed” (*So Long* 88). The commonality of different forms of injustice in different parts of the world calls attention to women’s condition. The similarity in women’s experiences requires measures likely to fight any form of injustice from which women are suffering. Bâ’s novel advocates female friendship as a solution to the plight of the Islamic and postcolonial woman. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo observes,

We may lose sight of Bâ’s recordings of her cultural understanding of what it means to be a woman in Senegal, specifically a woman in the Islamic-African home space. Still, there is need in contemporary society to understand why so many women, beyond the boundaries of race and ethnicity continue to be victims of societal and/or male subordination, exclusion and marginalization. (52)

The two friends and protagonists fight alone against their predicaments whereas the whole society sides with their husbands responsible for their oppression.

Despite their friendship and the experiences they have been through, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou do not embrace the same form of feminism. Even though Ramatoulaye is an emancipated woman, she does not believe in an extreme form of feminism. Her view of feminism is somewhat conservative since it takes into consideration African realities and her own conception of the relationships between men and women. Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka argues,

*So Long a Letter* advocates feminism without dismissing the specificity of the African experience or the different aspects that constitute a people’s culture. It is a feminism that combines the quest for African identity with personal independence, a responsible

individualism committed to a responsive collectivity. It supports self-fulfillment but not self-centeredness; celebrates motherhood, but not as the flag of identity. (169)

In spite of Ramatoulaye's education and her awareness about the different trends, she adopts a form of feminism that does not alienate her from her culture. Although she believes in women's liberation, she also understands that some feminists' principles do challenge African traditional beliefs. Her views qualify her as an Africana woman, who according to Hudson-Weems is someone who strongly believes in the peaceful cohabitation of men and women. Ramatoulaye sees men and women as partners in the general struggle for survival rather than as enemies. Azodo argues, "What Ramatoulaye spells out in rehearsing the events, decisions, crises and joys of her life is what it means to live a feminist life that can tolerate contradictions, overcome challenges, endure loss and find fulfillment in the interstices of an imperfect society as she struggles to raise her children, work at her profession and participate in the life of the community" (47). Her respect for traditional values and her views about men and women's relationships make her special. Schulster states, "Though Ramatoulaye seeks within a framework of new rules and new self-concept, she maintains her traditional belief in motherhood, in marriage, and in love, though she views marriage without love as impossible" (369-70). Aissatou is a fully liberated woman who does not need a man at her side and prepares herself to face all challenges, whereas Ramatoulaye advocates another form of liberation which requires men and women to work together. Ramatoulaye does not believe in a feminism that advocates animosity between men and women. She calls for a good understanding between men and women for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Although Ramatoulaye seeks the collaboration between men and women, the attempt does not work well in the novel. Indeed, the seeming harmony between the couples breaks and

leaves an emptiness that fails to be filled. This failure of marriage is reflected in Bâ's own life even though the book is not an autobiography. Answering a question about not being married, Bâ reflects, "No, although I am divorced, I *wish* I were married. Men and women are complementary. I know many women who prefer to divorce and remain single because their interests do not always work out within a marriage. I am not married, but that is not because I would not prefer to be married" (Harrell-Bond 383). Bâ's view differs considerably from those of some feminists who see marriage as an obstacle to their professional growth. In the neo-colonial context of *So Long a Letter*, more issues are at stake than a gender conflict. The struggle for liberation and economic freedom represents a real challenge to Senegal and requires the joined efforts of men and women altogether. Despite the betrayal she suffers from her husband and her friend's bitter experience, Ramatoulaye reflects, "I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman / Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings" (*So Long* 88). However, Ramatoulaye's widowhood brings a new perspective in her life because through the rejection of all her suitors, she also rejects marriage and takes full responsibility for herself and her children as a single mother. She wins a great battle with the patriarchy by refusing to marry Modou's brother, who attempts to make use of an orchestrated leviratic system in which men can inherit their brother's wife after his death. She complains, "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand" (*So Long* 58). Ramatoulaye openly challenges patriarchy by rejecting Tamsir because the community expects her to accept the proposal. This new status leads her to join Aissatou in her new-found field. The narrator observes, "I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world. This commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities" (*So*

*Long* 88). Ramatoulaye's different form of feminism does not exclude her from the movement. She actually identifies herself with the women's liberation group and is committed to the struggle to free women from oppression. Brandy Hayslett notes,

Ramatoulaye's decision to choose sisterhood as a way of expressing her concept of feminism is one that gains her respect as well as freedom from the orders of any man. Her assurance that knowledge, femininity, and power would gain her the freedom she desires is her own brand of feminism in a country full of women like her, who may have only a slight difference in their own definitions of feminism. (149)

Despite the various attempts to subjugate her, Ramatoulaye finally overcomes and succeeds in liberating herself. She becomes a liberated woman like Aissatou and assumes her new identity as a single mother who does not need a husband in order to be complete.

Even though Bâ mainly presents the healing powers of female friendship in *So Long a Letter*, she also warns that some women represent a threat to others. The novel presents this aspect of women's relationships as a challenge to female solidarity because instead of joining hands in bonding, they fight for personal interests. It denounces the fact that some women use other women as tools in order to accomplish their own goals and harm other women equally. However, the novel also reveals that not all women are willing to cultivate female friendship, and some may even cause pain to others for their own empowerment or for the sake of patriarchy. Those women used as tools are victims of a situation in which they have no control and cannot liberate themselves. Neither Binetou nor Nabou have chosen to become co-wives respectively to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. The women who command the plot, Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother, Lady Mother-in-Law,<sup>37</sup> manipulate and exploit them without caring for their well being. Azodo asserts, "The Binetous and the Nabous in general represent young girls

sacrificed at the altar of materialism in modern Senegal by rapacious mothers and mother figures, who crave the good life at the expense of their wards” (57). Actually, both Binetou and Nabou have been led to marry older men for their mother’s and aunt’s respective personal gratification. While Binetou marries Modou in order to provide her mother a chance to enjoy a middle class status, Nabou allows her aunt to regain her lost nobility and take revenge on Aissatou. The older women do not care about these children’s happiness; they put forward their own goals and engage the girls in polygamous marriages in which they will end up victims. Azodo adds,

Though the actions of Bâ’s heroines represent ways in which women claim constructive power, which affirms women’s positive roles in society and frees them from the constraints demanded by patriarchal tradition, some of the women who have access to power use it destructively. These women cause various problems for the heroines, whom they see as threats to the fulfillment of their own agendas. (57)

Not only the girls are sacrificed at the expense of these adults, but they also create much harm in causing the breakdown of other women’s marriages. While Nabou causes Aissatou’s divorce, Binetou makes Modou leave Ramatoulaye and her twelve children. While the heroines struggle against patriarchal domination, other women endanger the process and serve as agents to motivate and facilitate the oppression. Modou and Mawdo’s plans could not work if Nabou and Binetou did not accept to be the scapegoats for Aunty Nabou and Lady Mother-in-Law. If Aissatou and Ramatoulaye’s friendship is exemplary, Daba and Binetou’s relationship is a drastic failure. By marrying Daba’s father, Binetou betrays her friend and hurts her feelings. While women like Aissatou and Ramatoulaye do believe in female friendship, others like Binetou trade their friendship for men. This situation is very unfortunate for women who can

enjoy the benefits of female bonding while relating to men at the same time. Rebecca Wilcox observes, “Many of Bà’s women find their happiness and independence thwarted by overbearing parents, as in the case of Binetou, or by negligent and deceptive husbands” (122). Binetou’s act demonstrates a lack of serious commitment toward sisterhood as she chooses financial gain over friendship.

Lady Mother-in-Law embodies the category of women who will use any means to achieve their ends, even if this consists of harming other women. Blinded by the gifts Modou offers her, she not only forces her daughter into the marriage, but she also keeps on enjoying her new status as middle class. She fails to predict that her plan may not work and that something may go wrong, and when it does, she finds herself in big trouble with no potential solution. Modou’s sudden death<sup>38</sup> surprises her and deprives her of the belongings she earns under his name, including the house in which she lives. When she desperately pleads for favors, Daba reminds her, “Remember, I was your daughter’s best friend. You made her my mother’s rival. Remember. For five years you deprived my mother and her twelve children of their breadwinner. Remember. My mother has suffered a great deal. How can a woman sap the happiness of another? You deserve no pity. Pack up” (*So Long* 71). The novel suggests that Lady Mother-in-Law never bothers asking herself such questions because she does not care that she is causing pain; she does not even bother to think of Ramatoulaye. Her only concern is to achieve her goals, and she does this for five years; however, she loses everything ultimately. Her greed incites her to trade her daughter’s youth and education for material gain, which does not last long. She fails to encourage Binetou to ensure her own future through education but instead pressures her into unethical actions that harm her friends and render her powerless. The form of empowerment that Aunt Nabou and Lady Mother-in-Law use contrasts with reaching out to other women in an

attempt to help resolve their problems. Bâ's novel demonstrates the limitations of sisterhood through such conflicts of interests, and it draws attention to the tension between daughters and mothers-in-law that causes great damage to female solidarity.

In contrast to the conflict between mothers and daughters-in-law, Bâ portrays Ramatoulaye as an example of the perfect mother-in-law who initiates conversation, listens and then provides sound advice for the benefit of all. Ramatoulaye's relationship with her sons-in-law is remarkable because she transfers the friendship and understanding she has for her daughters to their husbands or fiancés, whom she regards as her own children. As Dubek observes, "Bâ's portraits of scheming mothers-in-law and their victims expose two obstacles to building female as well as national solidarity: caste prejudice and class antagonism. However, her presentation of Ramatoulaye as the model mother-in-law, sympathetic and accommodating, suggests that such obstacles can be overcome" (212). Ramatoulaye has many reasons to be angry with the man who impregnates her daughter and exposes her to exclusion from school; however, she advocates dialogue and forgiveness, thus avoiding a confrontation that may create no good. Bâ's novel invites women to follow Ramatoulaye's example in having a good relationship with their in-laws and encourage them to cultivate female solidarity for their own well being. Bâ's purpose is also larger than merely familial. Ramatoulaye is not only an example of a mother-in-law; she also cultivates a deep sisterhood with her daughters with whom she tries to establish a sound communication. She is not only a good mother, who cares and nurtures her children even when her husband leaves; she is also a mentor who exemplifies a sense of solidarity to her daughters and all women in general. She sums up her sisterly concern in these terms: "My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism



resists” (*So Long* 88). She also shows a lot of concern about her friend Jacqueline, who becomes sick because she feels alien. From Ivory Coast, Jacqueline<sup>39</sup> has trouble adapting to the Senegalese culture. Ramatoulaye comforts and cares for this friend who needs all the help she can get in order to overcome this difficult challenge, thereby accomplishing another form of female solidarity. Bâ’s novel invites women to follow these examples in order to cultivate the challenging path of sisterhood.

Besides relationships between in-laws, the novel mainly highlights female empowerment. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye’s relationship represents a good example of female solidarity. The moral support they offer each other is complemented by material assistance, as the car Aissatou buys for her friend restores her dignity and offers her new possibilities to express herself. The novel shows that friends need to share joys and sorrows but also abundance and deprivation. Aissatou’s generosity in buying her friend a car saves Ramatoulaye the humiliation of having to take public transportation while her co-wife drives her own car. This act gives Ramatoulaye her confidence back as she learns to drive. This gesture not only provides her with a means of transportation, it also heals her pain and restores her pride and dignity. As Wilcox comments,

Bâ provides her reader with two models for female empowerment: the woman who empowers herself at the expense of other women contrasted with the woman who empowers herself by working, however, subtly, to empower all women. As she demonstrates one model or the other through her characters, Bâ’s judgment is very clear as to the desirability or undesirability as well as the personal and social ramifications of each novel. (121)

Individual empowerment does not serve the cause of female solidarity and actually decreases women’s power through abuse. The restoration of Aunt Nabou’s nobility has no impact on the

society at all and serves only her selfish interests. She fails to realize that she is a perpetrator of a system. Besides, Bâ's novel emphasizes the primacy of female friendship to heterosexual love because female bonding is deeper and more sincere than attachments between men and women. The narrator reflects, "Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (*So Long* 54). As Modou deprives Ramatoulaye of his car, her friend provides her with a brand new one. Friendship prevails over love because love has shown its limits whereas female solidarity continues to manifest itself through various forms. When Modou leaves Ramatoulaye after twenty-five years of marriage with twelve children, the failure of love is not only real, but also dramatic; however, Aissatou will always be there for her.

Overall, *So Long a Letter* presents a strong form of female friendship that ultimately extends to female solidarity as Aissatou and Ramatoulaye not only empower each other but also participate in nation building. The sisterhood they build and maintain secures their survival against the constraints of patriarchy, tradition, polygamy, colonialism and any form of prejudice. Aissatou's care for her friend and generosity urge her to travel all across the Atlantic in order to present her condolences and provide her support. Ramatoulaye reflects on her friend's coming back and their friendship in general:

The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animates us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our children brothers and sisters. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests? (*So Long* 72)

The upcoming reunion of the two friends fills both with joy as they realize their friendship has survived and overcome distance and obstacles. The meeting will strengthen their bonding and allow them to fill the gaps they may have missed in the past while enjoying their freedom. The example of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, who are liberated from the burden of patriarchal oppression, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's example encourages other women to fight abuse and find their way through female solidarity. This reunion will also allow them to consolidate their friendship and enjoy each other's presence. This study mainly foregrounds the way the sisterhood between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou reaches out to other women and then becomes female solidarity which, in return, impacts whole nations. Their bonding not only benefits the people around them, but also through the experience at the girls' school, female solidarity becomes a reality that involves women from different nationalities, who acquire their own emancipation and provide a great contribution to their countries. Through this example, Bâ demonstrates that female solidarity goes beyond national boundaries and that female empowerment may also contribute to nation building.

#### CHAPTER 4. FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME*

Sefi Atta is a writer born and raised in Nigeria whose first novel is *Everything Good Will Come*. She is also the author of *Swallow*, her second novel, and *Lawless and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories which according to the information on the author's webpage will be published in May. She received her education in the West, first in England and later in the U.S. As an accountant, her profession did not prepare her to be a writer; however, her love of short

stories led her to this path. As an expatriate, living first in England and now in the U.S., Atta uses her writing to look back at her country by portraying realities and events that marked Nigerian history. Her displacement and distance give her another reading of these events, which mainly feed her writing. *Everything Good Will Come* demonstrates how the female friendship between Enitan Taiwo and Sherifat Bakare helps them survive the Biafra war, political instability and domestic violence in Nigeria.

Indeed, Nigeria has been through much turmoil since its independence in 1960. Although the end of the British rule meant the official end of colonialism, independence did not liberate the Nigerian people, for they faced other challenges. Initially divided into four regional governments, the country soon experienced unrest because of the growing tension between the different ethnic and cultural groups.<sup>40</sup> The ruling party was made of the largest group, Hausa Muslims, who live in the North, whereas the Igbo minority was predominantly Christian and lived in the Southeast. Misunderstandings and conflicts of interest between these people combined with ethnic, tribal, and religious differences caused a political conflict known as the Biafran War, which started on July 6, 1967, and lasted until January 13, 1970. The attempted secession of the Igbo Southeastern provinces that proclaimed themselves the Republic of Biafra put the country in a state of political unrest. The war turned out to be very deadly and caused starvation in the Igbo regions, which increased the death rate and added to the political and human drama.

Besides the tribal tension, the military also caused additional political instability through their frequent and violent involvement in political matters. The first Nigerian military coup occurred in 1966, only six years after independence, and the country has experienced up to six more coups since that time. The succession of coups has had dramatic consequences, threatening

the stability of the country and prompting a constant feeling of fear and insecurity. This intrusion of military men in government affairs occurred often, with much violence, and put politicians and civilians in general in great danger.

This dark episode in Nigerian history had a great impact on the population. It has drawn the attention of many writers who immortalize this painful chapter through literature. Atta keeps a close eye on these events. Although she portrays a strong form of female friendship in *Everything Good Will Come*, she also describes the Biafran war and the political unrest the military causes. Atta foregrounds how female solidarity helps Enitan and Sheri, the protagonists of the novel, face the impact of patriarchy as well as the above-mentioned events. The two girls also defy religion, ethnic and profound personal differences and survive. Despite the fact that Enitan and Sheri grow up in the same neighborhood, their different ethnic and religious backgrounds do not call for a friendship between them. The tensions in Nigeria do not work in favor of such a possibility. However, against all odds, they refuse to see these differences as barriers to their friendship. Although they make very divergent choices in their lives, their bonding helps them face and survive family matters, overbearing parents, and various emotional issues. The novel is written in the first person and the narrator, Enitan, has a global view of the social, political and even everyday issues going on in the society. Atta claims, "I would say my novel is narrated by a modern Nigerian woman who is in conflict with her patriarchal culture. She is an intimate narrator though, almost as if she is taking your hand and saying, come and see." Through this narrative, Enitan not only presents her own life and environment, but her friend's as well, therefore providing the reader with a richly drawn picture of the Nigerian society.

The first challenge Sheri and Enitan face is to grow up in a politically unstable Nigeria and cope with the constraints related to the chaos that the army sets up in the country. The journey from colonialism to independence does not seem to provide freedom to the Nigerian people who face another form of imperialism through the military. In fact, the army becomes a patriarchal institution that terrorizes and oppresses its own people. Enitan denounces the political instability in Nigeria, where soldiers overthrow governments. She states, "I knew that our first Prime Minister was killed by a Major General, that the Major General was soon killed, and that we had another Major General heading our country. For a while the palaver had stopped, and now it seemed the Biafrans were trying to split our country in two" (*Everything* 9). Living in such turmoil intensely affects Sheri and Enitan's lives as they witness what is happening in their country. They try to adapt to this difficult condition as best as they can in order to survive. However, the situation causes much anger and frustration as despair and hopelessness settle in most people. Enitan's father reflects, "Twenty-five years after independence, [. . .] And this nonsense. No light, no water, people dying all over the place, before their times, from one sickness or the other" (*Everything* 108). This pessimistic description is what Nigeria has become after many years of yearning for independence. The novel presents a recurrent image of military men killing each other and civilians as well, destabilizing the country. This chaotic and desperate situation causes a social deprivation that affects the lives of many innocent people. Through the portrayal, politicians fail to manage the transition from colonialism to independence, and they therefore endanger the security and peace of their citizens. Working for their own interests and motivated by the wish to get rich, they compete for power and put both the country's economy and people in danger. Atta's book criticizes the African elite that inherits the colonial power but ultimately fails its own people. Instead of soothing the pain and healing the wounds of people

who suffer centuries of slavery and colonialism, they seek their own empowerment. Through corruption and greed, they defer the dreams of a nation hoping for a better future.

The second difficulty Sheri and Enitan may encounter relates to their religious differences; however, they understand early on that their bonding is more important than these differences. Thus, they carefully distinguish their friendship from their respective Muslim and Christian beliefs. This decision saves them clashes of points of view. This silent agreement gives a solid foundation to their friendship and even reinforces their relationship, thereby helping them avoid falling in the trap of most Nigerians. Indeed, religious tensions are very rampant in Nigeria and often threaten the stability of the country. This open-mindedness allows Sheri and her family to invite Enitan to join them to celebrate Eid,<sup>41</sup> the end of Ramadan. Both Sheri's invitation and Enitan's acceptance reveal their degree of tolerance and how their friendship works to unite them even with controversial issues. Enitan feels completely at home and enjoys the food and festivities, and more importantly, she does not question their religion but instead respects it. This rich experience demonstrates their commitment to female bonding since the feast itself is a reflection of female solidarity. In fact, this gathering of women including Sheri's stepmothers, her sisters and sisters-in-law reveals how women join their efforts to cook, entertain and provide a sense of well being for their families and guests. Sheri and Enitan's friendship extends to this female solidarity in which all women present at the reception share, exchange. Through the relationship between Enitan and Sheri, Atta demonstrates that female friendship can transcend religious differences; she encourages women to cultivate religious tolerance and refuse to see religion as an obstacle to female friendship.

The third difference between Enitan and Sheri lies in their ethnicity or tribe; however, Atta proves that these differences do not always generate conflicts or constitute a handicap to

developing relationships. Through the friendship of a Yoruba girl, Enitan, and a Hausa girl, Sheri, Atta's novel demonstrates that the essence of a relationship does not reside in the origins or cultural background of the people involved, but on their degree of commitment and how they care for one another. The book calls for more understanding and unity between tribes in order to avoid civil wars like the Biafran war, showing the friendship between Sheri and Enitan as an example of sisterhood and encouraging other women to follow this example in order to save the country the catastrophe of another war. The terrible social and political consequences of the Biafra war on the country and its people do not need to be repeated. Atta's novel contrasts the commitment to female friendship of Sheri and Enitan, who work on tribal and ethnic differences, with the lack of such commitment by the proponents of the civil war, who fight over the same differences. The book invites Nigerians to focus more on national unity than on controversial issues that threaten the stability of the country. In the novel female friendship is a factor of unity that overcomes these divergences; men's relationships fail to do the same. For instance, one friend of Enitan's father, Uncle Alex, too conscious of his ethnicity, prefers to end their friendship rather than discuss openly tribal issues. The narrator explains, "The day the Civil War broke out, he delivered the news. Uncle Fatai arrived soon afterward and they bent heads as if in prayer to listen to the radio" (*Everything* 9). As an Igbo, Uncle Alex chooses to fight for his ethnic group rather than advocate the unity of the nation. He finally joins the war and is killed. Enitan reports her father's comments about him: "Sometimes I heard him talking about Uncle Alex, how he'd known beforehand there was going to be a civil war, how he'd joined the Biafrans and died fighting for them even though he hated guns" (*Everything* 10). Sheri and Enitan grow up during the civil war and experience the impact through the violence, the atrocities, and the political instability that follows. Enitan reflects, "My father would ask me to



hide under my bed whenever we had bomb raid alerts” (*Everything* 10). The men fail to overcome divisions or even find a common ground that might avoid the war and save their friend. However, the girls have a good understanding of the matter, and they follow a different path from that which causes the war. This awful experience of the war teaches a valuable lesson and invites the community to work on differences.

The fourth obstacle facing between Sheri and Enitan resides in their personalities; while Sheri is very open and provocative, Enitan is reserved and shy. Sheri’s manners and harsh language attract Enitan to her, and Enitan definitely needs an opportunity to escape the loneliness of her desolate home. Their encounter gives Enitan the chance to fight her shyness and claim her selfhood. She asserts, “From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations” (*Everything* 7). Therefore, the friendship liberates her, opens her up to the world outside her home and frees her voice. Moreover, Enitan’s very conservative upbringing contrasts with Sheri’s, who grows up in a very liberated household where her grandmother, Alhaja,<sup>42</sup> teaches her to face troubles and fight back. This strong woman represents a good inspiration to Sheri, who matures under her shadow. As an independent woman who runs her own business, she teaches Sheri valuable lessons of creativity and empowerment. This powerful mother figure nurtures not only her children and grandchildren but is also a symbol for a whole community. Talking about Alhaja, Atta states, “She is a highly celebrated character in African literature, the strong matriarch placed on a pedestal. Nigerian men just adore her. I see her as a woman who has survived our culture by becoming a soldier of the chauvinists.” This upbringing renders Sheri a powerful woman able to face various challenges. However, often left home alone, Enitan lives in complete isolation and does not have much contact with the outside world because her mother cares more for her church than her

daughter and her father is busy making money as a professional lawyer. Deeply wounded by the death of her son, Enitan's mother devotes her life to church at the expense of her family. Atta explains,

Enitan's mother in particular worried me. I had her wearing those white church gowns and acting superstitious. The fact is that there are women like Mrs. Taiwo in my neighborhood in Lagos. Yes, they are driven to churches by grief, but they also have some semblance of power and freedom in these churches. Their churches are communities outside the communities that failed them. Exile communities.

However, her involvement in the church does not soothe her pain or provide her healing; instead, it keeps her isolated and alienated from her own community. The contrast between Alhaja and Mrs Taiwo is significant and impacts the lives of the children they raise. Enitan chooses a different path from her mother, which offers her an opportunity to explore other horizons and learning experiences. Thus, the friendship gives Enitan the opportunity of having someone to take care of her.

Although a patriarchal structure, class is a unifying factor in *Everything Good Will Come*. Indeed, Enitan and Sheri's middle class status grants them the opportunity to live in the same privileged neighborhood, which gives them the opportunity to build and develop a strong female friendship that stimulates both. Even though Atta acknowledges that class is an obstacle to women's relationships, it does not have a negative impact in the novel since Enitan and Sheri belongs to the same milieu. Atta argues, "Lagos is a cosmopolitan city, integrated, but there are class barriers. People mix with people within their social circles. The girls are in the same social circle. I made them different for dramatic reasons." Unlike Morrison's novels, which foreground class differences as a potential threat to female bonding, Atta's book emphasizes the success of

female friendship between women of the same class. Even though Morrison and Atta may be conveying the same message that cross-class relationships are problematic, Atta's strategy seems to encourage women to form bonds within their class. However, despite the success of the female friendship she describes, this approach may be restrictive in that it may reduce the impact of female bonding. This class-based sisterhood may be limiting and does not call for a friendship that transcends class differences.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, Sheri and Enitan build and develop their friendship; however, although neighbors, they have to fight adversity before they can become friends. In fact, Enitan's mother does not share her daughter's open-mindedness about religion and ethnicity and therefore does not allow her to play with the Bakare children. Nevertheless, determined to befriend Sheri after they first meet, Enitan challenges her mother and allows her bonding with Sheri to grow as they learn to know each other. She remembers, "Sunday morning, after my parents left, I visited the house next door for the first time—against my mother's orders, but it was worth knowing a girl my age in the neighborhood" (*Everything* 26). Indeed, this initiative makes it possible for both Enitan and Sheri to develop a rare form of female friendship that survives various difficulties. When Enitan defies her mother for the sake of female bonding, she clearly demonstrates her sincere commitment to female friendship. She reflects, "Had I listened to my mother, that would have been the end of Sheri and I, and the misfortune that would bind us. But my mother had more hope of squeezing me up her womb than stopping our friendship" (*Everything* 43). She is determined to keep this friend despite her mother's disapproval because she feels the chemistry between them. Her choice pays off because Sheri offers her the nurturing, caring, and counseling her mother fails to give her. This decision opens up her mind and helps her face challenge. Their friendship starts when Sheri asks Enitan a simple

question, “Do you have a best friend? / No [...] / Then, I will be your best friend” (*Everything* 16). Simple as this statement may be, Sheri takes her words seriously and makes a sincere commitment to the bonding. They share joys and sorrows and communicate through letters during the school years, when they are apart in different schools. Enitan asserts, “Over the years, Sheri and I exchanged letters, sharing our thoughts on sheets torn from exercise books, ending them ‘love and peace, your trusted friend’” (*Everything* 51). The friendship challenges not only differences but distance as well, which instead of pulling them apart unites them, generate and feed the sisterhood.

This experience of female bonding extends to a form of female solidarity through Enitan’s meeting other girls of different backgrounds in boarding school. Living on their own, they form bonds that transcend differences and this experience enriches Enitan. She explains,

I met Moslem girls: Zeinat, Alima, Aicha who rose early to salute Mecca. Some covered their heads with scarves after school, and during Ramadan, they shunned food and water from dusk till dawn. I met Catholic girls: Grace, Agnes, Mary, who sported gray crosses on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday. There were Anglicans girls, Methodist girls. One girl, Sangita, was Hindu and we loved to tug on her long plait. (44)

The diversity of these cultures gives Enitan another experience of difference. Atta’s book also minimizes the divergences and renders the linguistic barrier between these different girls meaningless through the use of the English language as lingua franca. Because they communicate well in English, misunderstandings or misinterpretations are minimized, building trust and confidence. This lesson of female solidarity transcends religious and ethnic differences since these girls have different cultural backgrounds. This experience of female solidarity resembles the one Bâ portrays in *So Long a Letter*. In Bâ’s novel, school provides Ramatoulaye and

Aissatou an opportunity to meet various girls who not only learn lessons of emancipation but also cultivate female solidarity. Bâ and Atta's novels share the same views about educating women to give them a chance of economic freedom and enough awareness to liberate them from the burden of oppression. Moreover, they both see female friendship as a facilitator toward the realization of this financial independence and an opportunity to nourish the hope of female solidarity.

Although female friendship heals wounds for Sheri and Enitan, they both suffer from estranged mother-daughter relationships. Again, female friendship prevails over mother-daughter relationships and proves its healing powers through the positive impact Sheri and Enitan have on each other's life. As in Morrison's *Sula* and *Love*, estranged mother-daughter relationships urge respectively Sula and Nel, and Heed and Christine to form bonds and comfort and care for one another. In *Everything Good Will Come*, Enitan's mother is too demanding and does not provide much nurturing to her daughter, and Sheri does not have the chance to know her mother.

Although her grandmother loves and cherishes her, Sheri may still feel the absence of mother love. Despite the fact that Sheri does not seem to miss her mother, her absence may unconsciously affect her. The lie about her mother being dead and the sudden discovery of the truth may impact her even more. Sheri explains, "My mother is not dead. My father told me she was, but the truth was he took me away from her" (*Everything* 171). This situation causes her an emotional problem because she does not know how to feel about the life or death of a mother who never attempts to reach her. She observes, "The person who never came to look for me. That isn't a real mother" (*Everything* 171). However, despite the absence of her mother, her grandmother does her best to fill in the gaps: she protects her against any potential jealousy from her stepmothers and prepares her to face the world. Because Sheri's mother is white, Sheri has a

light-skinned complexion; however, her physical appearance does not bother Enitan and certainly does not impact on their friendship. Sheri's mixed race does not create an identity problem since she considers herself to be black despite her apparent physical difference, even though it costs her the mockery of school children. Discussing Sheri, Atta says, "Sheri does not even consider herself biracial. She is not confused about her identity and I know a few women like her. She is the equivalent of the blonde blue-eyed girl, the beauty ideal in Nigeria, whether or not we care to admit it." Besides, Enitan's mother gives her a strict upbringing that does not allow much communication between them. This strained relationship keeps Enitan in constant fear until her fortunate meeting with Sheri enlightens her life. This lack of mother care in the lives of both girls may have strengthened their friendship because they find in each other what their mothers fail to give them.

The bonding between Enitan and Sheri allows them not only to survive estranged mother-daughter relationships but also to share confidences about their future ambitions, and to discuss the restrictions on women's power in a politically unstable country. While planning their future, Sheri reminds her friend of her limitations as a woman in a patriarchal society when Enitan states her wish to be president: "Oh, women aren't presidents," (*Everything* 31). More realistic and mature, Sheri advises her friend not to dream because in a country where military men and politicians compete for power, there is no place for women. Sheri's realism does not mean that she believes in female submission; on the contrary, she sees herself as capable as anybody, men and women. However, she takes advantage of her grandmother's wisdom and analyzes the political situation of her country. Atta explains, "Sheri Bakare was another challenge. She is not a character that shows up often in literature and I could see feminists dismissing her. But she is a better negotiator than Enitan, less vulnerable and she doesn't seek approval." Indeed, feminists

may not agree with Sheri's realism; however, she is just reminding her friend of the existence of female subjugation that still keeps women from power. Aware of her grandmother's power, a matriarch who challenges both men and women, Sheri fights against female oppression. Nevertheless, she also takes into consideration the political and traditional realities in Nigeria where patriarchy and greed for political power hold women in bondage. Sheri's stand on women's issues resembles Ramatoulaye's in *So Long a Letter*. In fact, both women practice a realistic form of feminism that fights for the emancipation of women but also understands the constraints the environments pose. Both Bâ and Atta present characters who believe in different forms of feminism; while Ramatoulaye and Sheri advocate a conservative approach, Aissatou and Enitan have more radical views. Through the presentation of these contrasts the novelists foreground the complexities facing African women, who have a difficult choice to make.

Crafted according to mainly Western values, radical feminism conflicts with African culture and tradition. This reality makes Aissatou divorce because of polygamy, in a country where the practice is a rule rather than an exception, and Enitan refuse to cook, in a context where African women are naturally expected to cook. This open conflict urges scholars like Hudson-Weems to find the term womanism as an alternative to African feminism since it reflects more the African experience than feminism. Atta does not join the controversy around the issue. She reflects, "If these women are anything like me, they simply don't have the time to get into arguments over the word. Seriously though, I don't regard myself as any sort of feminist. It would limit my imagination in some way." Although Atta claims not to be a feminist, her portrayal of Enitan presents a feminist point of view. Indeed, Western educated, Enitan's challenge of the patriarchal structures in the Nigerian society makes her a renegade. Enitan's strong belief in women's emancipation fills her with hope, and she fails to realize the seriousness

of her condition as a woman in a patriarchal system. Sheri comments on her dream to become president, “Our men won’t stand it. Who will cook for your husband?” (*Everything* 31) Atta’s novel highlights that men are not ready to see women as heads of states; they still want women to remain in the kitchen. In the political chaos in Nigeria, women do not have a voice and are actually silenced, which young Enitan fails to understand. She does not seem to comprehend the problematic the gender issue poses in Nigeria.

The friendship between Sheri and Enitan proves to be a learning experience for them and leads them not only to discover and experiment with their womanhood but also to understand the danger that exists. Enitan’s seclusion does not allow her to know anything about sexuality, unlike Sheri, whose grandmother gives her a proper sexual education. Sheri becomes Enitan’s advisor and encourages her to explore her womanhood and her self. It is not until the age of fourteen that Enitan discovers her own sex, and her discovery is due to the encouragement of her friend Sheri: “I dragged my panties down, placed the mirror between my legs” (*Everything* 33). This episode strengthens their bonding because the scene when Sheri witnesses Enitan’s intimate moments with herself brings more confidentiality and trust in their relationship. She learns from her friend what she has never learnt from anybody else, including her own mother. As teenagers, the girls experiment with sexuality, and this scene of self-discovery introduces Enitan to sexuality. This episode resembles the scene in which Sula and Nel in *Sula* dig holes in the beach. Both sequences are learning experiences about sexual education and have no homoerotic connotations.

However, this scene leads to the next chapter of Enitan and Sheri’s lives. When trying to find Enitan a boyfriend, Sheri is raped. Their plan to have Damola, one of the boys in the picnic, date Enitan does not work out, and Sheri gets raped instead. Always ready to help her friend, Sheri puts herself at risk. Enitan explains,



I got up when I longer heard voices, walked toward the van. From the angle I approached it, I could see nothing behind the windscreen. As I came closer, I spotted the head of the boy of the boy with a cap bent over by the window. I edged toward the side door. Sheri was lying on the seat. Her knees were spread apart. The boy in the cap was pinning her arms down. The portly boy was on top of her. His hands were clamped over her mouth. Damola was leaning against the door, in a daze. (*Everything* 62)

Enitan witnesses first hand the rape of her friend and therefore rushes to her rescue. Enitan continues her description, “The boy in the cap saw me first. He let go of Sheri’s arms and she pushed the portly boy. He fell backward out of the van. Sheri screamed. I covered my ears. She ran toward me, clutching her top to her chest. There was lipstick across her mouth, black patches around her eyes, the portly boy fumbled with his trousers” (*Everything* 63). Enitan rescues her friend from the rapists and witnesses her pain and suffering as the friends experience a crucial moment of their lives. They have shared joyful events, and they also share this traumatic episode filled with pain and sorrow. “I dressed her, saw the red bruises and scratches on her skin, her wrists, around her mouth, on her hips. She stunk of cigarettes, alcohol, sweat. There was blood on her pubic hairs, thick spit running down her legs. Semen. I used sand grains to clean her, pulled her panties up. We began to walk home” (*Everything* 63). This pitiful and filthy description is the desolate image of rape. It transforms Sheri from a joyful and lively girl to a helpless woman who is physically and emotionally wounded. The thorough bath Enitan gives Sheri after they arrive home is meant to clean her from the impurities that soil her. However, a bath is too superficial and shallow to clean the deep damage soaked in her being.

Moreover, despite the effort to comfort her friend in these difficult times, Enitan does not understand the reality about rape. She actually condemns Sheri and considers her to be

responsible for what happens. She does not condone Sheri's decision to play with the boys instead of staying with her. Their different personalities play a key role in the decisions they make. While Enitan's shyness does not allow her to integrate the group, Sheri's open-mindedness urges her to get involved. However, the rape represents a crucial period in their friendship filled with regrets, sorrow, pain, blame and separation. Indeed, Enitan blames Sheri for hanging around boys all the time during the picnic:

Yes. I blamed her. If she hadn't smoked hemp it would never have happened. If she hadn't stayed as long as she did at the party, it would certainly not have happened. Bad girls got raped. We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls. Laughing with boys, following them around, thinking she was one of them. Now, I could smell their semen on her, and it was making me sick. It was her fault. (*Everything* 65)

Enitan fails to understand that Sheri chooses to play with the boys, but she does not choose to be raped. She keeps the same judgment on her friend until another female friend she meets in London comes to her rescue when she makes it clear to her that, "nothing a woman does justifies rape" (*Everything* 74). From then on, Enitan develops a better understanding of her friend's predicament and sympathizes with her. She comes to realize that the boys took advantage of Sheri's friendliness and open-mindedness when they raped her. While Sheri enjoyed their company and willingly shared their games and treated them as equals, they only saw her as a sexual object and therefore carefully plotted a plan to abuse her. Atta observes, "Every Nigerian knows a Sheri. Ostensibly, she possesses power because of her beauty, 'bottom power' as we call it at home, but the reality is that she is an objectified woman, 'a piece of ass' and she suffers the worst consequence for this: rape." This difference in judgment between Sheri and the boys makes her a victim of a situation in which she has no control. Betrayed, overpowered and

abused, she suffers both a physical and emotional pain that takes a long time to heal, if it ever does. Through this episode, Atta's novel demonstrates the primacy of female friendship over men and women's relationships since women run the risk of getting raped like Sheri. Although women may also abuse other women, and not all men cause such pain to women, Sheri's experience teaches a valuable lesson and urges her and her friend to be more careful in their relationships. The book denounces women's rape and points out that even women like Sheri who sympathize with and befriend men do not deserve to be raped; just because women associate with men does not make them immoral and responsible for being raped. It also criticizes Nigerian Law, which does not try rape cases fairly but instead condemns women. The lack of a fair judgment renders women more vulnerable since men are not punished for their crimes. Sheri's case did not go to court because the lack of fairness discourages women from filing lawsuits. Raped women fall victim not only to those who abuse them but also of the system that fails to provide them a fair trial. The system thus, becomes an accomplice to the rapists who may be encouraged to repeat their acts and also puts the security of its female citizens in danger. Atta's novel disagrees with and fights against the following statement, "Bad girls got raped" (*Everything* 65), and sensitizes women like Enitan so that they do not fall into the trap of believing that women are somehow responsible.

Sheri's ordeal does not end with the rape since she gets pregnant and has a self-induced abortion in which she loses both the pregnancy and any hope of future motherhood. This painful experience greatly impacts her by endangering her life through a precarious and risky abortion and making her barren in a society that values children. This episode illuminates the dangers that loom around teenage girls, who despite their wish to experiment with their sexuality also run the risk of getting raped. The two friends learn it the hard way, and Sheri's apparent maturity does

not save her from boys' tricks. Sheri's abortion almost costs her her life. Later, she reflects, "What did I know? Taking a hanger to myself, with all the biology I studied. I still thought I had a black hole inside me. So, which single man from a normal family would have a person like me?" (*Everything* 102) Sheri feels hopeless because she realistically understands that African men primarily marry in order to have children. Enitan supports her view:

Better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren. We had both been raised to believe that our greatest days would be: the birth of our first child, our wedding and graduation days in that order. A woman may be forgiven for having a child out of wedlock if she had no hope of getting married, and she would be dissuaded from getting married if she didn't have a degree. Marriage could immediately wipe out a sluttish past, but angel or not, a woman had to have a child. (*Everything* 102)

This is the sad fate of African women whose destiny is closely related to motherhood. Another Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, deals with this theme in *Joys of Motherhood*, in which Nnu Ego loses her role as senior wife and is finally repudiated by her husband because she does not have children. When she remarries and gets a son, she attempts suicide when he dies only days after his birth. Sheri chooses not to get married because she knows the reality and does not wish to suffer the same consequences. The traditional African society expects women to be not only mothers but also mothers of male children likely to help in the fields. Modernity has not changed this expectation since male children are expected to continue the family lineage whereas girls marry and bear their husbands' names.

The rape also impacts the friendship somewhat since Enitan and Sheri both avoid talking openly about the situation. Enitan asserts, "She didn't come back to my house, and I didn't visit her either because I hoped that if we pretended long enough the whole incident might vanish"

(*Everything* 66). Fate also seems to lead the friends along different paths; while Enitan goes to England to pursue a Law degree, Sheri indulges in modeling and becomes a Beauty Queen.<sup>43</sup> However, despite years of separation, they resume their friendship the first day they meet again because they have never stopped seeing themselves as friends. Enitan remembers, “It was like finding a pressed flower I’d long forgotten about. Her smile was less broad; her pink gums seemed to have disappeared” (*Everything* 95). After the misunderstanding clears, Sheri and Enitan resume their friendship with more strength and vision since they have become more mature and independent. This new togetherness fills them with joy and allows them to take care of one another’s matters carefully. Their ability to work on differences saves their friendship and gives them a chance to comfort and nurture each other. However, they trade roles because Sheri, who was more mature and supportive, becomes the one who needs help. “The rape changed Sheri. She had been an open child and she became a cautious woman, somewhat cynical” (Atta). The rape impacts Sheri’s life in various ways that change her.

Besides rape and its consequences, Sheri also faces oppressive experiences from her boyfriend, a Brigadier, who constantly abuses her. Aware of their first misadventure with men, Enitan advises Sheri not to let him oppress her. She wants to keep her friend from being a victim in dating a rich and older man who already has two wives. Sheri finds herself totally dependent on the Brigadier, who dictates her life. In so doing, she not only loses her freedom to move freely but also spends all her time in the kitchen cooking for him. Although Sheri does not want to depend on the Brigadier, her father’s death puts her in a delicate economic situation. She reflects, “Want? I beg you, don’t talk to me about want. When my father died who remembered me? Chief Bakare done die, God Bless his family. We didn’t even know where our next meal was coming from, and no one cared. Not even my uncle, who took all his money” (*Everything* 101).

The Brigadier abuses and oppresses Sheri by regarding her as an object in his hands. Even though she is aware of the prejudice to which she is subject, Sheri sees the relationship as an opportunity to survive and save her family as well. She is ready to accept the injustice because she does not have a choice, although her voice has been silenced, which makes Enitan really sad. Enitan observes, “I remembered only that she was the most powerful girl I knew, and then she wasn’t anymore, and I became disappointed with her” (*Everything* 102). The rape and her father’s death urge Sheri to develop survival strategies. Unwilling to indulge in a marriage in which she may suffer because of her inability to have children, she dates a married man who already has children. She also knows that the Brigadier can satisfy all her financial needs even though she has to trade her liberty of movement and action. Atta’s novel denounces the sugar daddy system<sup>44</sup> in Nigeria, where married wealthy men keep beautiful young girls like Sheri in bondage. Although these men take care of all the financial needs of the girls, they exploit them in many other ways by using them as tools to show in private meetings or travels. Enitan reflects, “Sheri was the Nigerian man’s ideal: pretty, shapely, yellow to boot, with some regard for a woman’s station. Now she was a kitchen martyr, and may well have forgotten how to flaunt her mind” (*Everything* 105). Sheri’s Brigadier claims to be a good Muslim and urges her to wear the “hijab”<sup>45</sup> to cover her head, although he commits open adultery to everybody’s knowledge. Commenting on the issue, Atta raises the question surrounding girls like Sheri whose beauty represents a real power for them but at the same time causes their misfortune by making them “objectified.” Indeed, their beauty draws the attention of influential men who end up abusing them. Enitan worries about her friend’s condition, urging her to refuse such subjectivity by emphasizing the oppressive aspects of the relationship.

Enitan's strong determination to liberate Sheri of this oppressive relationship moves her to help empower her through economic freedom. She encourages her friend to start her own business in order to liberate herself from the burden of oppression and provide for herself. "You're bright, you're young, and this man is treating you like his house girl" (*Everything* 36). Due to Enitan's sensitization, and the violence of the Brigadier, Sheri soon realizes her worth. She finally packs up and leaves him because she will not allow him to beat her. She claims, "Nobody hits me. You hit me and I will hit you back" (*Everything* 170). Through this relationship, Sheri has suffered not only domestic violence but lack of freedom as well since her boyfriend did not allow her to go outside. This form of oppression causes not only corporal damage but also psychological and emotional unbalance. Because she has been dependent on him financially, he thinks he can treat her as he wants. Fortunately, Enitan understands the source of the problem and saves her friend in time. As a result, Sheri not only liberates herself from patriarchal oppression, but she also becomes more confident than before as she explores her inner qualities. When she starts a catering business on Enitan's advisement, she soon understands that she does not have to spend her days cooking for a man who does not even show up to eat. From now on, she will cook in order to make her own money, but not to please anybody. Sheri's bonding with Enitan saves her because it gives her the push she needs to wake up and believe in herself. She will not be cooking for a man who beats her, but for her own economic development. She transforms the patriarchal obligation of cooking into an economic industry that liberates her. The success of the catering business empowers Sheri, who finds financial independence that provides her with a sense of well being. Through this experience, Atta's novel encourages women to reach economic freedom in order to liberate themselves from the burden of

patriarchal structures and their agents that may keep them oppressed. It takes a strong determination, good will, and a refusal to be subjugated for women to follow this path.

Enitan helps her friend face and overcome her challenge; likewise, Sheri also plays a key role in Enitan's life. These mutual exchanges and assistance make their friendship stronger since each helps the other face difficulties. Sheri soothes Enitan's pain when the latter suffers two betrayals on the same night. After her father confesses to having a bastard child, she runs to her boyfriend's room and finds him with another woman. This heartbreaking experience severely affects Enitan, who suddenly discovers the infidelity of the men in her life. In the custody of her father after her parents' divorce, she has only had respect and admiration for this man, who even influences her own career since she works hard to become a lawyer like him. However, the discovery of his adulterous life renders him unworthy in her eyes and causes her tremendous pain. Enitan reports the confrontation she has with her father: "He straightened up. Yes, he said. Debayo was his son, four years younger than me. He lived in Ibadan. So did his mother. No, they were never married. He was in medical school there, finished last year. He was born a year after my brother died" (*Everything* 151). The deception and pain urge her to face this man whose vulnerability she just discovers. For the first time, she understands an important aspect of her mother's suffering by having to cope with the escapade of an adulterous man. However, another surprise awaits Enitan when she rushes to her boyfriend's room expecting some comfort but finds him with another woman. She finally goes to Sheri's house where she gets the nurturing and care she needs to recover from this painful experience. After Sheri offers her the support necessary to heal this wound, Enitan realizes the power of female friendship that allows her to escape a potential nervous breakdown. Sheri soothes her pain and provides her with the care and security to help her face the challenge. Atta asserts, "The women support each other through



difficult times. For instance, Enitan rescues Sheri from her abusive relationship, and Sheri comes to Enitan's aid when Enitan finds out about her father's philandering." Sheri's support contrasts with the betrayal and deception these men impose on Enitan. Through this experience, she learns to be very careful with men since her own father has deceived her. The infidelity of these men also teaches a lesson about Nigerian society in which sexual infidelity is rampant. Atta's novel criticizes this system that threatens family cohesion and breaks up marriage. However, the reciprocal solidarity the two women share strengthens their friendship and helps them survive patriarchal oppression.

These deceptions are followed by another episode in Enitan's life when she faces another patriarchal structure, the kitchen. Although Sheri starts a catering business, Enitan faces a cooking issue with her husband and in-laws who urge her to cook constantly. Unlike her friend who enjoys cooking, Enitan does not like the kitchen and the tradition that links it to African women. Sheri warns her about the fate Nigerian society reserves women, who whatever their level of education, are expected to cook for their husbands and their families. She reflects, "Maybe you don't know this because you were raised by your father, but let me tell you now, to save you from unnecessary headache in the future. Forget that nonsense. Education cannot change what's inside a person's veins. Scream and shout, if you like, bang your head against this wall, you will end up in the kitchen. Period" (*Everything* 104). Enitan learns this lesson the hard way: although she tells her husband she does not cook, she nonetheless finds herself in the kitchen cooking for a very extended family. The situation frustrates her, but she soon realizes that is what everybody expects of her. Her anger overflows when her husband refuses to help or even cook and serve himself. Here is Enitan's answer when he asks her to serve his brothers: "Well, why can't you ever get them drinks for once? [. . .] Why can't you go to the kitchen?"

What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg?" (*Everything* 187) This answer irritates him, especially in front of his brothers, and he feels humiliated. Enitan's father has raised her according to Western culture in which almost everybody eats in fast food or other restaurants; however, this habit conflicts with the African tradition<sup>46</sup> in which women cook food for their family. Enitan is split between the tradition in which she lives and the modernity she embraces. She challenges the patriarchal institution that transforms women into kitchen martyrs.

Commenting on this issue, Atta argues,

I think we choose to live between two cultures, traditional and western, and people get caught in the conflicts that arise. I also think that what we call traditionalism is really just patriarchy. This is not to suggest that western cultures are more progressive. Here in Mississippi where I live, conservatism is another name for patriarchy, perhaps because it's harder to defend patriarchy.

Atta foregrounds the various forms of patriarchal institutions that exist in different cultures under different names. Any structure that subjugates women to men or has an impact on their liberty in any way is patriarchy no matter where the injustice occurs.

Enitan resists this form of patriarchy that keeps her a prisoner in her own kitchen. She complains, "Someone ought to call a national conference for diet reform. The day an African woman can prepare a sandwich for a meal, that will be the day. I've spent the whole day in that bloody kitchen" (*Everything* 213). Despite her tremendous efforts, her husband does not appreciate the cooking and even makes the following remark, "The trouble is [. . .] You are not a domesticated woman. You just don't have that [. . .] that loving quality" (*Everything* 214). Atta's novel draws attention to the issue of cooking because women like Enitan have started to complain and reject this custom. Nevertheless, this tradition is deeply rooted in African culture,

and even those who disapprove have to comply when the situation demands it. Even Enitan knows that whatever the reason of the gathering, guests have to eat, and despite her revolt she will not serve them restaurant food because she understands that this would violate the rules of hospitality according to the African norm. Sheri comes to her rescue whenever necessary by helping her cook for her in-laws because she realizes her friend's misfortune. Enitan's mother-in-law expects her to cook since that is exactly what she does. Very docile and dependable, Mrs. Franco is the prototype of the traditional African woman who takes care of the slightest need of her men: her husband and sons. She fails to form a bond with Enitan or develop female solidarity with her because they don't have the same domestic standards, not to mention the same stand on women's emancipation. Discussing the writing of her novel, Atta remarks, "Enitan's mother-in-law, Mrs. Franco, was a challenge too. She may be put upon but she gets sympathy from her sons and husband because she is obliging. She also sets standards Enitan cannot meet." The kitchen issue keeps bothering Enitan, who realizes that as long as she is married, she will have to cook for her husband's relatives. This form of patriarchal oppression is the fate of African women, and as Sheri says, education cannot save Enitan from this duty because even if she can afford servants, she still has to do her own part of the cooking. The friendship between Sheri and Enitan helps the latter face the kitchen issue. Indeed, Sheri comes whenever they organize a reception, but Enitan is still the host and therefore accountable for the success or failure of the ceremony. Aware of the limitations of her friend and of her internal revolt, Sheri rushes to protect her from criticism and humiliation.

Enitan and Sheri's friendship survives patriarchal oppression, broken unions and failed marriages, and the impact of political instability. Atta's novel describes the effects of the succession of military governments on the lives of her characters in a country where many

civilians have lost their voices. Living in constant fear of being arrested for doing nothing, Nigerians astonishingly cope with the restraint of their liberty and the shrinking of their economic power. Enitan's father gets arrested for simply petitioning for the liberation of a client. Enitan relates, "My father immediately published a statement in the Oracle, saying he would continue to petition until Peter Mukoro's release. I worried about my father's safety, given that under Decree Two, any arrest could be justified" (*Everything* 192). He is sent to jail for defending his client and his imprisonment seriously affects Enitan, who while pregnant lives with constant anxiety and keeps his law firm operating. The arrest of such eminent personalities for no apparent reason demonstrates the lack of security in a country where anybody can be sent to jail according to the whim of the military. The army endangers the foundation of democracy and freedom of speech since any statement can be seen as an offense to the government. The arrest of Mr. Taiwo makes Enitan experience first hand the oppression the political instability creates in Nigeria. Hopeless and without any clue about her father's whereabouts, Enitan lives with despair and fear for his life. The lack of safety goes along with economic hardships. Although a lawyer, Enitan cannot afford to live on her own and is compelled to live in her father's house since the political instability has also ruined the economy. This situation causes hopelessness in the young woman, who feels lost and worthless. In these feelings, she is not alone. When a whole generation of educated young adults depends on their parents to survive, education offers few expectations, but the economic situation in Nigeria does not have much to offer. However, despite hardships, Sheri and Enitan stick to one another and use their bonding as a positive force to challenge the difficulties. Enitan states, "She was my oldest friend, my closest friend. We had been absent friends, sometimes uncertain friends, but so were most sisters and she was the nearest I'd coming to having one in this place where families were over-extended"

(*Everything* 211). Sheri and Enitan actually reinforce their relationship and mind their own business when they realize the limitations of their power on politics. They refuse to let the situation in their country lead them to total despair but instead try to live a normal life. Living in such a dramatic political situation, they provide each other the comfort and security the army supposed to protect them fails to offer. Indeed, their friendship helps them face this difficulty and survive. Both Sheri and Enitan have suffered other forms of patriarchal oppression from husbands, lovers, in-laws, or just from a system that supports this form of domination. They face different agents of patriarchy which try to subjugate them, but they refuse to be overcome and fight back in order to regain their freedom. This refusal to accept defeat energizes them and gives them enough strength and courage to cope with the political upheaval and unrest in their country where the military oppresses people.

Through painful political upheavals, Enitan discovers a form of female solidarity thanks to Grace Ameh, a journalist she meets when her father is arrested. As a reporter, Grace faces a dilemma, the obligation to inform her readers but also the fear of being arrested for doing that. However, despite her fear for her own safety, she decides to keep on doing her job. The meeting of the two women brings positive changes in their lives as Grace supports Enitan emotionally and advises her on what to do concerning her father's arrest, and Enitan not only provides Grace with interviews to keep her journal open but also joins her cause in an attempt to sensitize people to injustice and eventually request the liberation of detainees. This common determination leads them to prison, where they spend many hours just for attending a meeting. This painful experience not only allows them to better understand the inadequacies of the political system but also to strengthen their relationship because they share something they will never forget. Enitan's arrest while trying to liberate her father gives her an opportunity to comprehend the policy

behind these acts. As Thompson states, “In spite of her education and the status of her lawyer father, Enitan must endure all the hazards of life in a politically unstable, patriarchal society where violence is often the rule and female subjugation the norm” (98). Enitan and Grace’s journey in prison also allows them to make the acquaintance of a group of women who try to adapt to their situation as best as they can. Enitan describes the experience,

There were twelve other women in the cell they threw us in; fourteen of us in a space intended for seven, with ventilation holes on an area the size of an air-conditioning unit. There was no air, no light. My pupils widened in the dark. Outside crickets chattered. Mosquitoes buzzed around my ears. The women lay on raffia mats, overlapping each other on the cold cement floor. (*Everything* 265)

These women develop survival strategies that help them cope with their difficult situation and refuse to be impressed by the cleanliness of Grace and Enitan. On the contrary, Mother of Prisons,<sup>47</sup> the woman who dictates the rules in the cell, tries to bully them, not because she is mean but because she needs to express herself and show some authority in order to remain calm and sane. She asserts, “You’re no better than me. Not in here. We sleep on the same floor, shit in the same bucket. I’ll deal with you in a way you least expect if you insult me. Any of my girls here will deal with you in a way you least expect” (*Everything* 266). Deprived of liberty, she provides herself with some form of freedom by becoming the leader of the group and imposing her own rules; however, Grace and Enitan soon discover her frailty when she emotionally breaks down and finally tells them her story. She painfully explains how the military keeps women in prison without a trial. This confidence breaks the ice between the women and creates a sudden bonding that allows them to discuss and exchange ideas. When all women lay on the ground trying to find some sleep, they realize that for now they all share the same fate with no

distinction between lawyers, journalists and housewives. This awareness coupled with the consciousness of them all being women unites them and clears differences. This experience teaches a lesson of female solidarity between women, who although hopeless, join efforts in their struggle for survival. Conscious of their common predicament, they strive to resist their oppression by forming bonds and helping each other. Although Grace and Enitan cannot do much to help liberate these women, they sympathize with them, understand their misfortune and become aware that alongside men who get arrested every day, women also have their share of the problem.

Another form of female solidarity Atta portrays in *Everything Good Will Come* is within Sheri's family. Indeed, the solidarity between her stepmothers which finally reaches Sheri herself and her sisters is exemplary. The bond between them allows them to challenge the patriarchal structures that attempt to deprive them of their property after their husband's death and overcome. The survival strategy they develop by helping Sheri in the catering business gives them the opportunity to care for their family and succeed despite their status as single mothers. The understanding between these co-wives is extraordinary; they do not see polygamy as a divisive factor. Instead of becoming rivals who compete for the sake of their husband, they become friends and strive hard to raise their children together even after their husband dies. They embody a perfect example of female friendship and develop female solidarity in their family. This peaceful and successful portrayal of polygamy contrasts with the one in *So Long a Letter* that causes much pain and suffering to women. Unlike Bâ's novel, which foregrounds the destructive aspects of polygamy, Atta's book demonstrates that polygamy can also bring female solidarity if women accept to share equally their responsibilities and duties. *In everything Good*

*Will Come*, the issue is less polygamy itself than women's ability to accept and tolerate each other as partners but not rivals.

Despite these forms of female solidarity, Enitan faces a great challenge in her marriage because her husband wants to restrict her freedom of movement. Indeed, he does not tolerate her involvement in the movement that petitions for the liberation of prisoners, including her own father. Enitan tries hard to cope with the challenge, but when she finally understands that her husband is restricting her liberty, she packs up and leaves with her new-born baby. Even though Enitan's anger and frustration about the kitchen issue is well known, her decision to leave her husband while the reception organized for the initiation of her baby is still going on seems somewhat surprising. The author comments about the ending, "I thought it gradual, rather than sudden. The fact that a lot of people have taken issue with the ending means that I failed to demonstrate that in the story. The timing was prompted by her husband forbidding her to join the political group. She still wanted her daughter to be given the proper rites and so she waited until the naming ceremony." Nonetheless Enitan's departure allows her to regain her liberty. She now has the freedom to be more involved in the women's group for the liberation of both men and women. Reflecting on her decision to participate in the petitions, Enitan argues, "I could not wait. There were babies who stayed in their mother's wombs too long. By the time they were born, they were already dead. There were people who learned to talk on their death beds. When they opened their mouths to speak, they drew their last breaths" (*Everything* 328). This participation is the only solution she finds to the patriarchal domination and political instability that suffocate her. She decides to fight back and refuse to be silenced. She had a difficult choice to make between her marriage and her freedom, and she chooses her freedom. When she realizes that her husband is compromising her liberty, she makes the deliberate decision to leave him



because she will not allow anyone to bully her. Her feminist instinct urges her to fight for her liberty and not let anyone, including her husband, manage her own life. Moreover, her filial obligations compel her to initiate a desperate attempt to help her father. She then sees the petitions as an opportunity to liberate prisoners and then joins even if it costs her marriage. Sheri supports her decision and helps her face the challenge of separation and raising her baby as a single mother, and they both overcome patriarchal oppression. Like Sheri, then, Enitan reclaims her freedom and becomes a liberated woman. She reflects, “rich man wants to own your future, poor man wants to own your past” (*Everything* 307). Their refusal to be subjugated makes them fight back, stand up for themselves but for their community as well.

Through Enitan’s experience, Atta’s novel raises the crucial issue of marital failure and highlights the way women suffer patriarchal oppression through marriage. Enitan’s marriage fails despite the effort she makes to accommodate her views about the kitchen. Her decision to leave is timely for her, stops the oppression and saves her from further damage of patriarchy. Although Enitan is in her first marriage, her husband has already divorced once and has the experience of failed marriage. Enitan’s parents are also divorced which has a great impact upon her. Actually, her parents’ relationship has been noisy and problematic as long as she can remember, and it culminates in divorce. She later realizes that her father’s infidelity and constant oppression of her mother have caused their divorce. She learns from this experience and refuses to let marriage embitter her as it did her mother, who takes refuge in religion in order to escape her trouble. Her own marriage problems allow her to reflect on her mother’s fate and comprehend her misfortune. Sheri does not directly suffer the impact of a broken marriage because her parents were never married and she did not marry either; the oppressive nature of her relationship with the Brigadier drives her out. Moreover, she understands the suffering of the

Brigadier's wives who witness their husband dating other girls under their noses, and who even beg Sheri to become a third wife to make the union official and alleviate their pain. But Sheri has had enough of the abusive relationship and does not wish to trap herself in a marriage in which she does not have any hope of happiness. Through the failures of these marriages, Atta's novel questions the foundation of this patriarchal institution that has become the tool of women's oppression. It joins Morrison and Bâ's novels in foregrounding the lack of stability of marriage. All four novels acknowledge that marriage is no longer a safe haven for women, who instead suffer from various forms of oppression through this patriarchal structure.

Enitan's departure not only liberates her but also strengthens her friendship with Sheri while they were left on their own with no parents. Although the absence of Sheri's mother seems not to affect her, her father and grandmother's deaths left her vulnerable. The feeling of being abandoned by her own mother makes her feel bad and rejected; however, she strives hard to challenge the difficulties and survive. Enitan reflects, "Her birth mother and motherhood taken away from her, and she wasn't thinking of tearing her clothes off and walking naked on the streets. She was stronger than any strong person I knew" (*Everything* 308). She clings to her friend in an attempt to fill the gaps in her life and takes care of Enitan's baby as if it were her own. Although she cannot have children, she has a natural instinct of a mother because she is used to taking care of her sisters and other babies in her family. In the same way Enitan finds herself parentless when her father gets imprisoned and her mother dies. Her mother's sudden death adds to the already painful situation of her father's arrest. In addition to Sheri's perpetual help, their neighbor Mrs. Williams also takes charge by offering to help, thereby revealing another form of female solidarity. Left without parents, Sheri and Enitan nurture each other and try to complement the lack or absence of parents. As each tries to be there for the other, their

friendship develops, grows and provides them with more confidence and trust. Aware of the missing gaps in their lives, they support each other emotionally and let their friendship stimulate them. Besides, Enitan and Grace give more shape to their project of involving women in the liberation of prisoners since Enitan has more time and freedom. Their decision to work for the liberation of women's husbands, brothers or fathers provides more awareness to the community and also looks less threatening to the military leaders because initiated by women. This new bond brings about more consciousness in women, challenges the government and efficiently contributes to the liberation of prisoners including Enitan's father. It provides them with hope and arms them with courage and determination to face their many difficulties. This sisterhood generates solidarity among women and works to awaken and motivate them to join the struggle for liberation.

The female friendship Atta portrays in *Everything Good Will Come* helps Enitan and Sheri face and overcome the different patriarchal challenges in their lives. Indeed, their bonding helps them heal the wounds of political instability and patriarchy in general in a country devastated by its own elite. Atta's novel gives a gloomy description of a Nigerian society facing greed and corruption, war and political unrest. However, throughout all this destruction, she portrays female friendship as a potential savior because of its ability to work on differences and its soothing and healing powers. The book also emphasizes how female bonding extends to female solidarity, thereby involving more women and having a positive impact on the community as well. Although not all women Atta describes in the novel are involved in female solidarity, each of them faces a form of patriarchal oppression. The similarity of their experiences demonstrates that the common fate they share relates to their gender. As each fights her own subjugation, Atta's novel presents female solidarity as a solution likely to bring

salvation. She reflects, “I wanted these characters to reveal the power conflicts between women and between men and women. It’s now that I see that the story itself is a study of power and the characters that Enitan interacts with are like landmarks on the route she takes towards empowering herself.” Although Enitan learns from her mother, her mother-in-law and the various women she meets, her empowerment comes from her friendship with Sheri and the female solidarity she develops with other women. Her journey to womanhood transforms her from a shy girl into a strong and independent woman able to face any challenge. This change of identity participates in her empowerment and enlightens her path. Atta asserts, “Enitan is like a lot of Nigerian women I know. She is intelligent, headstrong and yet vulnerable because she needs approval from the society. She is constantly trying to free herself from the ‘good girl good family’ yoke.” However, female solidarity changes her into a more secure and authoritarian woman who breaks up her marriage for the sake of her individual freedom. Although different from her friend Sheri, she too acquires strength and comfort. Unlike Enitan, Sheri has always had a strong sense of self that makes her journey somewhat easier, despite the patriarchal challenges she had to face. However, though their lives are full of hardships, both Enitan and Sheri, thanks to the female friendship they build and transform into female solidarity, succeed in overcoming and empowering themselves and their community.

## CONCLUSION

Morrison, Bâ and Atta present patriarchal institutions in their novels as threats to women's relationships. All four novels describe the plight of women who suffer different forms of oppression and portray female friendship as a strategy for fighting back against prejudice. Although Morrison's novels portray failed female friendships in order to foreground the power of patriarchy, Bâ and Atta's books demonstrate that women can fight the attempts to subjugate them and succeed into overcoming and surviving. The protagonists in *So Long a Letter* and *Everything Good Will Come* make a stronger commitment to female bonding and develop financial independence to liberate themselves from the burden of oppression. The characters in *Sula* and *Love* give up the unity of self and other they built during their girlhood friendship and develop a type of self-centeredness which contributes to the break down of their bonding. Bâ and Atta's novels foreground the healing powers of female friendship that soothes pain and makes it possible for women to survive prejudice. They also highlight how female bonding extends to female solidarity and in effect reaches more women and participates in national building. This concept of nation building does not exist in Morrison's novels and even the weak attempts at solidarity in the community initiated to fight Sula's unconventionality fades away as soon as Sula dies. Moreover, the postcolonial context of *So Long a Letter* and *Everything Good Will Come* makes nation building a concern in newly independent African countries where the struggle for development requires the efforts of men and women which is not an issue in *Sula* and *Love*. Like in Morrison's novels, Atta's text also portrays strained mother-daughter relationships. The novel reveals how Enitan and Sheri's bond allows them to care and nurture each other thereby filling in the gap of their mothers' absence or neglect. So, Morrison and

Atta's novels share the same views about how estranged mother-daughter relationships help the characters compensate the lack of mother-love and heal each other's wounds.

Another point that draws the attention of the authors and has an impact on female friendship is class. Although Morrison, Bâ and Atta's novels consider class to be an obstacle to women's relationship, each has a different reading on the issue. In both *Sula* and *Love*, Morrison presents class as a patriarchal institution that poses a threat to female bond. Bâ portrays class as caste prejudice that does not take into consideration the economic status of people but rather focuses on their family background. This ranking causes problems to the lower castes who suffer a social discrimination from the nobles. However, the novel regards female friendship as a solution because it integrates the lower castes and allows them to form bonds with the nobles. As for Atta, her novel seems to encourage bonding between women of the same class. Although this form of sisterhood may be less challenging, it may also be limiting since it does not involve women from all backgrounds.

In addition to their different perceptions about class, Bâ and Atta's novels do not have the same conception about polygamy. While Bâ presents in *So Long a Letter* polygamy as destructive, oppressive and responsible for women's misfortune, Atta portrays polygamy as a unifying factor that brings female solidarity. Through the experiences of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, polygamy causes much pain and suffering to women. However, through the presentation of Sheri's stepmothers, Atta shows another aspect of polygamy. Ironically, although co-wives, these women are friends who co-mother their children and take care of their husband. Even after their husband dies, they decide to stay and raise their children together, run their business and develop a form of solidarity with Sheri, their daughters and daughters in-law. This

experience teaches a lesson that acceptance and tolerance of polygamy may reduce or even eliminate the tensions and conflicts between women.

Morrison, Bâ and Atta present marriage as problematic in their novels. This patriarchal agent causes women much trouble by keeping them oppressed. The lack of a stable couple in *Sula* demonstrates the failure of marriage. Although Nel's upbringing prepares her to be a wife, the break up of her marriage reveals that the union was doomed to fail. This failure raises the question about the stability of marriage. Besides, the marriage in *Love* is not only a complete failure because founded on child abuse; it also destroys the life of Heed and her friend Christine as well. The marriage initially fails because the age difference foregrounds the pedophile nature of the union, and Cosey treats Heed more like a property than a wife. This oppressive relationship is a counterexample of what marriage should be. Like in Morrison's novels, marriage also fails in *So Long a Letter*. Although the marriages Bâ describes in the novel were based on love and harmony, they end up in failure. Indeed, both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's marriages break up when their husbands take second and younger wives. They both ultimately become single mothers who successfully raise their children and liberate themselves from the burden of oppression. These experiences encourage women to free themselves from oppressive unions and assert themselves as free women. Atta also portrays failed marriages in *Everything Good Will Come*, and the novel seems to urge women to leave subjugating unions. Through the example of Enitan, the text highlights the necessity for women to separate themselves from husbands that threaten their liberty. The lack of empowering marriages in the novel also indicates the failure of this patriarchal institution.

As all novels point out the suffering and injustice women face in marriage, they also denounce the overall oppression exercised on them. The portrayal of *Sula* associates the plight of

Sula and Nel to that of the whole community of the Bottom that faces race and class prejudice. Since Morrison's language bears witness, the injustice the Bottom lives also reflects the pain of the African American community that struggles to fight oppression. Although the community portrayed in *Love* is almost all black, class represents the main factor of oppression. His ownership of a Hotel Resort in a poverty stricken community singularizes him as a patriarch ruling over his subjects. This oppressive image reveals the power of class and how it impacts people's life by transforming them into subordinates like Heed's parents. The subjugation of Christine and Heed goes beyond the boundaries of their home and involves the whole community. In the same way, Bâ's novel compares the plight of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye to the suffering of all Senegalese women, and to the pain of all women regardless of national boundaries who face any form of prejudice. Through the portrayal, She emphasizes that the fate of Senegalese women who mainly face polygamy, neo-colonialism and constraints of tradition may not be that different from that of other women whatever the form of oppression they may suffer. Atta's book also adheres to the same principle and associates Sheri and Enitan's suffering to that of all Nigerian women who also have to face the Biafra war, political instability or any form of injustice. Although the pain each novel describes may be different, it reveals women's suffering which indicates different forms of women's oppression.

These different forms of oppression urge women to form bonds in order to fight back. Indeed, female friendship allows women to face adversity and challenge the attempts to subjugate them. Although Morrison portrays failed sisterhoods, she acknowledges the potentiality of female friendship and encourages women to make connections in order to fight patriarchy. The successful girlhood relationships she portrays reflect her stand on female bonding even though they fail afterward. The success of Bâ and Atta's novels demonstrate the



strength of female friendship that liberates women from the burden of oppression and gives them a chance to empower each other. This survival over patriarchy is indeed vital and highlights the nurturing, and caring qualities of female bonding that makes this liberation possible and allows women to heal the wounds contracted through the process.

Despite the different cultural and social realities that the Morrison, Bâ and Atta's novels describe, they have worked together because they all acknowledge the potentiality of female friendship. Morrison chooses to portray failed female friendships as a warning in order to show the chaos that a lack of female bonding is likely to cause in women's lives and to encourage them to cultivate successful sisterhood. The oppression she describes in *Sula* and *Love* is not different from the suffering of the Senegalese women that Bâ depicts in *So Long a Letter* or the pain women face in Atta's novel. This commonness in women's experiences of oppression reveals the universality of female subjugation, a plight that women have to fight everywhere. The way all novels agree on the failure of marriage despite the different settings and backgrounds of the characters is very revealing. This failure demonstrates the limits of this institution that does no longer provide security and comfort to women. Besides, estranged mother-daughter relationships represent another dramatic issue in which almost all novels agree. Through the portrayals, these problematic relationships result from failed parenting and shows how children all over the world suffer from this painful experience. The only exception is *So Long a Letter* in which Ramatoulaye is the prototype of the mother who cares and nurtures her children.

This study uses a specific theory of female friendship that does neither concern sibling nor homoerotic relationships between women. It mainly focuses on the nurturing, caring, exchanges, giving and receiving counsel and sharing experiences. The friendship impacts the lives of the subjects as a whole and helps them resolve all sorts of problems. The sisterhood

reaches out various aspects of the characters' lives and allows them to benefit from all their interactions and endeavors. The study also highlights the support and comfort between women which give them the opportunity to extend their friendship to female solidarity that involves more women who may also benefit from this sisterhood. Indeed, this female solidarity may not only involve more women which may impact the community but also participate in nation building. However, the research reveals the existence of two forms of empowerment—women who empower each other through female friendship and those who empower themselves at the expense of other women and work for their destruction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Black diasporic women are people of African descent.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to institutions such as polygamy, race, class, female subjugation and different forms of oppression in the novels.

<sup>3</sup> Mariama Bâ portrays a system deeply rooted in the Senegalese culture that allows men to have up to four wives.

<sup>4</sup> A term which Clenora Hudson-Weems theorizes and contrasts to feminism because of its focus on African realities.

<sup>5</sup> Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou experience polygamy because their husbands marry second wives.

<sup>6</sup> This concept raises the issue of being black and female and foregrounds the dilemma that women face because of their gender and race.

<sup>7</sup> A system used by colonialists in Africa in order to divide the continent into different territories to make it easier to control.

<sup>8</sup> The Bottom is the name of the community in *Sula*. The narrator informs us that the name originates in a joke based on a master's tricking of his slave. The master gives the slave some land on the mountain and makes him believe to be at the bottom of Heaven.

<sup>9</sup> Organizations like *Les soeurs Optimistes Internationales* allow women to cultivate female solidarity and acquire economic freedom.

<sup>10</sup> A form of sisterhood that gives women the opportunity to take care of children and form bonds as well.

<sup>11</sup> This is a name given to an African traditional story teller.

<sup>12</sup> This term indicates a higher-ranking status according to the Senegalese caste system.

<sup>13</sup> “Cinderella’s Stepsisters” is an article in which Morrison theorizes female friendship.

<sup>14</sup> A tribal and religious war that opposed Northern and Southeastern provinces in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970.

<sup>15</sup> The closeness between Sula and Nel’s friendship urges some critics to label the relationship homosexual.

<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Rich’s theory is based on the nurturing qualities of women’s relationships but not on sexual connotation.

<sup>17</sup> Although Helene is a devout member of the church, her mother is a prostitute which explains why her grandmother raised her.

<sup>18</sup> Helene and Nel went to New Orleans to attend her grandmother’s funeral.

<sup>19</sup> Eva supposedly put her leg under the train in order to collect insurance, which explains why she has one leg.

<sup>20</sup> A very passive community, the Bottom fails to develop female solidarity.

<sup>21</sup> *Jazz* is another Morrison novel in which a crime is committed but the guilty does not serve any jail time.

<sup>22</sup> The men in *Paradise* assault and murder the women who live in the Convent.

<sup>23</sup> Heed belongs to the Johnson family, the poorest in town while Christine is Cosey’s granddaughter, and Cosey is the richest man in the community.

<sup>24</sup> This term emphasizes the destructive power of patriarchy.

<sup>25</sup> A World-War II veteran, Shadrack celebrates the atrocities of war every year through his national suicide day.

<sup>26</sup> Both Jude and Nel lose a sense of self through their marriage because of the challenges they face.

<sup>27</sup> After Nel and Sula's friendship breaks up, Sula lives and dies alone.

<sup>28</sup> Junior brings change in Heed and Christine's lives which leads to the understanding of their predicament.

<sup>29</sup> Christine and Heed live in a very big house with plenty of rooms which give it an empty look, and their estrangement increases this emptiness.

<sup>30</sup> Western education came to Africa through colonization, and Bâ and her generation are the first educated women on the continent.

<sup>31</sup> Associations like this one work to promote women and help them acquire financial freedom.

<sup>32</sup> Arabs invaded many African countries long before white colonialism and converted most people to Islam.

<sup>33</sup> Ramatoulaye's husband dies and according to Islamic rule she has to remain in seclusion for a period of four months and ten days. Although she can run errands inside and outside the house, she has to cover her whole body and lower her voice.

<sup>34</sup> A member of parliament, Daouda Dieng proposed to Ramatoulaye when they were younger; he renews his proposal after Ramatoulaye's husband dies.

<sup>35</sup> Goldsmiths belong to the lowest class according to the Senegalese caste system. This situation explains Aissatou's predicament when she marries a prince—her mother-in-law rejects her and finds her a co-wife.

<sup>36</sup> During colonization, Dakar was the capital of the West African colonies ruled by the French system. The schools of the administration were located in Dakar which explains why the girls attend school in Dakar and not in their countries.

<sup>37</sup> The narrator does not give Binetou's mother a name. Ramatoulaye ironically calls her Lady Mother-in-Law because of her affiliation with Modou.

<sup>38</sup> Modou dies of cardiac arrest while he has been living with his second wife for five years, deserting Ramatoulaye and her twelve children.

<sup>39</sup> Jacqueline suffers a nervous breakdown and becomes very ill. The doctor finally discovers that she needs more the company of friends than medical treatment.

<sup>40</sup> Nigeria has a multitude of ethnic and tribal groups and a variety of languages which explains the diversity of its population.

<sup>41</sup> Eid is a period during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk for a whole month.

<sup>42</sup> Alhaja is a title given to women who accomplish the pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>43</sup> Sheri has been Miss Nigeria for many years and has even participated in international competitions representing her country.

<sup>44</sup> Sugar daddy is a system in which married men date young girls, take care of their financial needs and strive to keep the relationship secret.

<sup>45</sup> A material that Muslim women use to cover their heads and faces with.

<sup>46</sup> African tradition requires that women cook food for their families everyday. Traditionally, Africans do not eat in restaurants; it is up to women to prepare three meals a day in most cultures.

<sup>47</sup> Sent to jail because she killed the man who tried to rape her, Mother of Prisons is still awaiting trial after many years spent in prison.

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