Personal experiences and adversities: the existential struggles of women in American women's literature

Keir Elizabeth Singleton
Clark Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SINGLETON, KEIR E. B.A. CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY, 2006

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND ADVERSITIES: EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLES OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S LITERATURE

Committee Chair: Dr. Viktor Osinubi

Thesis dated May 2011

This is a study of women's struggles in a system of patriarchy as portrayed in the works of Willa Cather, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. The selected works include: My Antonia, The Color Purple, and Sula. Most commonly, in a patriarchal society, masculinity is usually defined by aggression and dominance, whereas femininity is portrayed as symbolic of passivity and submission. The need for women to be submissive in a male-dominated society caused many of the women characters to begin to suffer from lack of individuality and self-expression. The idea that women often evolve into different personalities because of their life experiences and struggles is at the center of the works selected for this study. In these particular works, the writers demonstrate that in spite of ethnicities and family backgrounds, many women living under the system of patriarchy become strong and outspoken because of their personal experiences and life challenges, while some of them become casualties of their struggles but learn from the experiences in order to become agents of social change.
PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND ADVERSITIES:
THE EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLES OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
KEIR ELIZABETH SINGLETON

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2011
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II- A Woman's Struggle for Strength in <em>My Antonia</em></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III- The Fight Against Male Superiority in <em>The Color Purple</em></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV- Standing Up for Self and the Community in <em>Sula</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION- A Woman's Journey Through the Adversities of Patriarchy</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The notion that women should not be defined by gender roles that the system of patriarch has prescribed for them, but that they should learn to create their own sense of empowerment, is a recurring theme in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*. In these works, Cather's Antonia, Walker's Celie and Shug, and Morrison's Sula and Eva are women from varied ethnic backgrounds, different regions of the country, and different ages, but as women they also experience the same adversities, which are generated from the idea that women should project a certain image in society and maintain a specific role in the home. Most commonly, masculinity is defined by aggression and dominance, whereas femininity is portrayed as emblematic of passivity and submission. The need for women to be submissive in a male-dominated society causes many women to suffer from a lack of individuality and self expression. Prominent women writers, such as Cather, Walker, and Morrison portray the struggles of women in trying to empower themselves. As writers, they consistently undermine patriarchy to reveal its contradictions, double standards, and abuses toward working women. Then, through the adversities of these women within the patriarchy, Cather, Walker, and Morrison allow them to emerge as advocates of change in their communities, especially as decision-makers and organizers.
Gender roles and their structuring by patriarchal society have also fascinated many female literary writers. The precedence to fight against the stigma of women having to follow a specific role in society has been forthcoming since the mid 1800s. Many women writings at this time spoke out against the injustices that accompany being classified in a specific spectrum. According to Joanne Dobson, in her article, “The Hidden Hand Subversion of Cultural Ideology in Three Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Novels,” the ideal of “female rebels did exist in 1850: (sic) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and the Grimke sisters were among the most visible of a diffuse community of women who were beginning openly to question and to challenge the social dictates that shaped and governed women’s behavior” (223). The quest to give a voice to the voiceless women of this time is often overlooked because of the lack of significance given to the women themselves as they try to reconstruct gender roles through their literary texts. The focus has been largely on nineteenth century male writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, Charles Chesnutt, and Fredrick Douglass. The importance of making change and according self respect to women in a patriarchal society was antithetical to the hierarchy set forth by men. Women, therefore, are expected to be submissive to male dominance, and consciously and unconsciously they become aware of the psychological impact that male dominance has on their decision-making process for self-growth. The complexity of the social and psychological development of these women was acknowledged throughout the nineteenth century. Joanne Dobson, a respected literary critic, writes:
nineteenth-century women saw themselves as having a central role in redeeming society from what was perceived as a crass and destructive, but economically and politically necessary, masculine ruthlessness. Through women’s restriction to the home and to the domestic virtues, their essential and vital role was to compensate the deficiencies of male culture. (224)

Dobson’s observations reflect the sole significance of women as second-class citizens in the intellectual and cultural production of society. Her observations further reveal the notion that women were only important for domestic positions in the patriarchy. Many women accepted, and still accept, this role of male dominance over women. However, women writers, such as Stanton, Lott, Stone, and the Grimke sisters, did not accept the sexism that is stifling their voices to speak about the injustices within the male-dominated American cultural landscape. Since they did not accept this ideology, it seems that their “subversive hands” paved the way for writers such as Cather, Walker, and Morrison.

A vast majority of entire generations of women are in support of the hierarchy that governs the patriarchal society, but there is a small number of women who, according to Dobson, provide the “rebellious murmurings against the social codes that kept woman in her place” (226). Their “murmurs” have caused a positive influence of change and expression in the literary works of many women writers. This “whisper” of change grows to a roaring need for social acceptance and internal growth for women who were once considered voiceless. Literary writings begin to play a significant role in encouraging change, or at least in becoming an outlet for suggesting change in the
patriarchy. Reflecting the injustices bestowed upon women of the 18th century is important because the "rebellious murmurings" became an outlet for women writers to present their despair. The authors of this era (e.g. Stanton, Mott, and Stone) are forerunners for voicing the injustices for women then and now. Dobson suggests that they "struggle with the cultural ethos of feminine obedience and selflessness in a manner which clearly coalesces the issues and reveals their implications for an individual woman" (228). The ability to give women a voice so early on, as well as showing women's struggles within the patriarchy, sets the tone for future writers, such as Cather, Walker, and Morrison, to fight against the contradictions, double standards, and abuses that afflict women who are victims of patriarchy.

Furthermore, another woman of prominence in the struggle against patriarchy is Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), the author of Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Fuller received a robust education from her father, Timothy Fuller, a Harvard graduate, lawyer and legislator. The younger Fuller learned Greek, Italian and French, and before reaching her teens, she read Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Molière. According Joslyn T. Pine,

Had she [Margaret Fuller] been a man, she would have been a perfect candidate for Harvard; as it was, she was the first woman to be allowed entrance to the male-only Harvard College Library. So she continued her studies at home, becoming especially expert in the field of Italian and German literature. (viii)
Fuller was a prolific writer, eventually serving as a literary and cultural critic for New York Time. She was one of the early champions of women’s rights and also one of the very first American women to become a professional writer. However, many of her professional achievements went unrecognized in her lifetime. Tragically, she along with her husband and son perished in a shipwreck off the coast of Fire Island, New York, on her way back from Europe to the United States. As Pine points out:

"It is in no small part due to the positive forces of the 20th century literary revisionism that Margaret Fuller has been restored to her proper place from a mere footnote in the lives and works of the male figures of the Flowering New England, to prime mover in bringing forward into the heart of our culture—past and present—creative reconstructions for a myriad of societal ills." (xi)

Cather, Walker, and Morrison are some of the inheritors of Fuller’s project of elevating women’s voices in American literary canon. These female writers have succeeded in pushing further the frontiers of women’s advances in literature. In pushing the frontiers, these writers undermine the limitations that hinder women with social growth by allowing their female characters in their works to witness the complexities and struggles that vex the traditional woman in their communities. For example, in all of their works, women are “unwilling” to venture away from home; they are “unwilling” to work outside of the home because it is considered a masculine trait. In addition, Cather, Walker, and Morrison allow their female characters to witness the lack of progressive social interaction between men and women on one hand and
between women and women on the other. For example, women are only to speak to
their male counterparts when they are first addressed by that man. They are unable to
speak “casually” with their significant others because that would be an “out of place”
action for a woman. Women also have a struggle communicating clearly with one
another because of the arrogance and belittlement that women invoke on each other.
Cather, Walker, and Morrison again allow their women characters to witness abuse that
men feel entitled to inflict on women. The women are forced to accept demeaning
words that breakdown the female spirit, as well as accept the physical punishments that
black men exert on their women in their search for dominance and white people in their
quest to prove their “superior” role. Although these writers are speaking about women
from various regions of the country, and different ethnic backgrounds and ages, they all
are, according to Dobson, “enter(ing) the communicative experience...conveyance of
and empathy for experiences, feelings, and insights that go beyond the constraints of
both literary and cultural convention” (228). The ability to cross the boundaries of age,
regional, and ethnic lines illustrates Cather, Walker, and Morrison’s comparable
determination to battle the universal conflicts within the patriarchy, such as double
standards, the myth of male superiority, and sexual and physical abuses.

While all three of these characteristics are evident in the literary works, the
traits occur in the various novels in varying degrees. As the authors subvert the
traditional, submissive, and abusive roles in their own way, they allow the characters in
the novels to present their own strength and perseverance. By assessing and
challenging the notions put forth by the patriarchy, these writers allow their main characters to emerge as astute decision-makers and organizers.
CHAPTER 2

A WOMAN'S STRUGGLE FOR STRENGTH IN MY ANTONIA

As one of the women writers examined in this study, Willa Cather serves as the focus of my analysis in this chapter. I examine Cather’s contribution to the elevation of women’s voices in literature through her main characters. The ideology of defying the patriarchy and the double standards that accompany the system of patriarchy are prevalent in Willa Cather's My Antonia. Although, at surface value it is not obvious that this novel is heavily focused on a woman’s struggle in a time of adversity, it begins to delve into the development of a woman’s striving to live her life as she feels adequate. The life she strives to live is in opposition to the ideal role of a woman in her society.

On one level of analysis, the character in question, Antonia, is a woman of the patriarchy. In her childhood Antonia plays the role that accompanies helplessness and submission. She claims: “I never know you was so brave, Jim...You is just like big mans; you wait for him lift his head and then you go for him Ain’t you feel scared a bit? Now we take that snake home and show everybody. Nobody ain’t seen in this kawn-tree so big snake like you kill” (32). Cather presents moments like these in Antonia’s life where she is the submissive, traditional woman that is only able to speak
when complimenting a man or revitalizing a man’s ego. Antonia, again, continues the perception and the expectations of patriarchy for a woman in her adult life by bearing ten children, living in poverty, trying to survive from day to day. In addition, economic factors force Antonia to take on labor reserved for men, as her view of work reveals: “I ain’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now…School is alright for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (80). The stigma that accompanies Antonia’s recent desire to be a provider for her home is a reflection of the hierarchy forcing her to give up her gender role because of economic dilemmas. In Sidney Bland’s article, “The History Teacher,” the critic remarks that there is a “(significant number) of external forces, such as economic conditions, on internal group dynamics as a precondition for social change . . .Women have experienced economic deprivation while ironically living closer to the group holding power over their lives than with each other” (446). Bland’s statement supports the idea that the male figures in Antonia’s family are proving to be unable to hold leadership positions because of their economic failures or societal pressures. Moreover, Antonia attends school just until she reaches the age to be a caregiver for her family, which is typical for many of the young girls of the 19th century, as opposed to attending secondary school or college to further her education. All of the above elements force Antonia into becoming the decision-maker, provider, and organizer of her family even at a very young age.

To aid in Antonia’s transformation as a decision-maker, Cather contests the double standards of male superiority that is prevalent in the patriarchy by displaying Antonia as a character transforming herself from a complex woman combating
adversity in society to a woman embracing her hardships and succeeding in spite of them by incorporating masculine traits she retained from her Grandfather. Cather gives her this determination by recreating certain aspects of Antonia’s character and giving her “masculine” traits to help her become a dominant force in her environment. Gender change is a typical trait given to women characters of the 19th century to give them empowerment against the patriarchy. Gender change, defying male superiority, and confronting double standards—all of these elements present themselves in this novel through the lack of male character domination and conventional masculinity. Instead, Cather gives these characteristics to Antonia, which shows her evolution. Conversely, Jim (the leading male character) is timid, compassionate, and attentive; he concerns himself with the well being of Antonia, who slowly becomes an assertive woman. To disclose the conditions that support Antonia’s transformation, Cather employs the male character, Jim, to say the following: “As much as I loved Antonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me...I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protection manner” (30). Antonia’s dominating attributes show how Cather is subverting the standards of males overshadowing women in the patriarchy. During this era, the primary position of the male character is to be the older (indicating wisdom), more respected person (representing leadership) in the novel that takes care of the helpless young female. Cather rejects this double standard and makes it apparent early in the novel that Antonia is the one that will be more adventurous and prevailing against the standards that have been placed on women in a male-dominated society.
Antonia has to take on this domineering position because of the lack of male authority projecting itself in her society. As she begins to embrace her masculine qualities, she feels as though it is her responsibility to become a provider for her relatives, instead of achieving her own personal success. She is forced to put her personal goals of attending school aside because of circumstances that are beyond her control (her father’s suicide). Cather is suggesting that Antonia’s experience is typical of women during the 19th century because they are not able to follow their personal journey for self growth. These women are forced to have the responsibility as the provider for their family. Antonia feels that it is her responsibility to push her dreams aside, such as attending school, and become the source of income for her family. Cather’s reconstruction of gender brings to light the struggles that force women in a patriarchal society to combat male superiority and double standards. She is speaking against these issues that affect women’s life progression to become what they desire to be—strong women with empowering voices in society.

Cather’s My Antonia proves to be an outlet for the societal constraints that suppress women who are victim of patriarchy, allowing them to succeed against the standards that have been given to women in the patriarchy. The author shows Antonia’s transformation by allowing her to contest the adversities that are presented before her in the patriarchy and allows her to emerge as a decision-maker and an effective organizer. As a woman, Antonia is a source of energy in the novel. She strives to achieve all the goals that circumstances have conspired to force her to accomplish in life. Cather slowly reveals the development of Antonia’s life to mold her
into a self-righteous woman, holding on to self-worth and personal significance that are often taken away from women within the patriarchy. All of the adversities that Antonia is forced to suppress because of the hierarchy of men is released in the story of Antonia. The feministic ways in which Cather presents Antonia as doing what is necessary for her family, but still trying to follow her own objective in life, exposes the adversities that face women during this time. Antonia is shunned and belittled for the actions she made in her life, but she still prevails and does what she feels is best for herself and her family. She is the epitome of a feminist woman, fighting for acceptance in a male-dominated society. Her strength and courage to still find happiness, without succumbing to the oppression of the “All American Dream,” develops her character and allows her to persevere:

she (Antonia) lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true... She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. (226-227)

It seems obvious that Cather is trying to put forth a feminist woman who is trying to find her way in life, but does not lose herself in the process. Cather wants the reader, especially women, to appreciate their differences, and not to accept what the patriarchy enforces as the standard lifestyle for a woman, such as being timid and submissive. She is presenting a world of diversity and opportunity for a woman who is willing to fight against patriarchy. She also puts forth the message that a woman’s dream is obtainable
if she strives for personal success. Once a woman ceases living by the standards given by a patriarchal society, like many women do during the 20th century, and she openly confronts gender prejudice and life’s challenges, she will then begin to live life in totality.

In essence, Cather has created a modern woman that is imbued with all the necessary quality needed to challenge a patriarchal system that often disadvantages women and “enslaves” them. Through her reconstruction of gender, Cather has clearly presented challenges to traditional assumptions about women and gender roles, at least not in the way that society used to conceive them. By so doing, Cather has used the medium of fiction to postulate new directions for male-female relationships and the power structure that currently exist in contemporary society.
CHAPTER 3

THE FIGHT AGAINST MALE SUPERIORITY IN THE COLOR PURPLE

Alice Walker presents in The Color Purple the struggles of enduring turmoil and strife that plague many females who are victims of patriarchy. Walker’s ability to graphically illustrate these grievances allows the reader the capacity to empathize with the adversities that women of the 20th century often endure. These adversities which often include double standards, the myth of male superiority, and abuses, provide the essential ingredients necessary for female oppression and exploitation. Walker is able to demonstrate the oppression through her fictional characters, Celie and Shug.

Walker presents Celie as a victim of patriarch, who is unable to stand up against the men in a male-dominated society. Celie is a victim to male-ownership when her father tells a suitor of Nettie (Celie’s sister) “I can’t let you have Nettie... But I can let you have Celie” (8-9). Celie’s father’s willingness to “let” someone have her, suggests that she is a piece of property, perpetuating the theory that women are subject to exploitation by men in the patriarchy.

Celite is a reflection of a woman trying to function in a system of patriarchy, only good for procreation, homemaking, and hard work. Moreover, her father continues to try to “sell” the perception that Celie is an “acceptable” wife, even if she lacks other redeeming qualities. The father states: “She ugly...But she ain’t no
stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do
everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (9).
Celie receives no respect, and like many of the women of the patriarchy, she is
expected to accept this verbal abuse and to submit to the myth of male superiority. In
addition to all the anguish she receives from men, Celie also experiences the double
standards and disrespect that women present for other women. For example, Celie
loves Shug Avery (Mr. ___’s mistress) whom Celie desires to mimic, as she clearly
points out: “She like a queen to me...And she dress to kill...She look so stylish it like
the trees all round the house draw themselves up tall for a better look...She look like
she ain’t long for this world but dressed well for the next” (22, 47). In the following
remark, Shug expresses her disregard for Celie: “She look me over from head to foot.
Then she cackles. Sound like a death rattle. You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain’t
believed it” (48). Walker presents the viewpoint that women disparage one another
because the system of patriarchy forces them to compete against one another; the
system also breaks down the camaraderie or support system that should exist amongst
all women. The initial lack of love and respect that Shug shows toward Celie is going
against Walker’s theory of “womanism,” which is important to the fight against the
patriarchy. In In Search of Our Mother’s Garden, Walker defines the term as “a black
feminist or feminist of color...usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or
will behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good”
for one...Responsible. In charge. Serious” (4). Although Shug is ultimately a
reflection of many of the womanist characteristics that Walker posits in her own theory,
however she initially resists much of the uplifting female qualities that define womanism. By the same definition, Shug may be classified as a victimizer of Celie. All in all, Celie falls victim to the stigmas and dissensions that prevent her from becoming the sole decision-maker of her life.

Although the reader’s first impression of Shug might suggest that she aids in the humiliation and disgracing of Celie, it is apparent that Shug herself is a victim of patriarchy because she is both a victimizer and an enforcer of double standards. On the surface, Walker presents Shug as a mistress that is only good for sex and making babies, which is one of the stigmas that plague women and make them victims of a patriarchal society:

...he just brought her (Celie) here, dropped her, and kept on running after Shug Avery...He be gone for days. Then she start having babies...Mr.____ be gone all night Saturday, all night Sunday and most all day Monday. Shug Avery in town for the week-end...they sleep together at night. Not every night, but almost every night, from Friday to Monday. (21, 27, 80)

Shug is a pathetic character who, unbeknownst to her, is another casualty of patriarchy because she is only significant for her ability to please men in the bedroom, hence her being Mr.____’s mistress. Although Shug is promiscuous, there is a double standard as to how Shug is perceived by the system of patriarchy. Walker allows the reader to initially view Shug as a mistress to show that victimization and abuse are prevalent against all types of women during 1910-1940s. Shug initially embraces this role when
she first meets Mr.____. She explains the encounter thus: "... when I met Albert (Mr.____), and once I got in his arms, nothing could git me out. It was good, too... You know for her to have three babies by Albert... it had to be good... Midwife come, preacher come... they think a good time to talk bout repent... I was too big a fool to repent... I loved me some Albert____" (126). Shug desires affection from men so strongly that she loses herself in men. She becomes emotionless and accepts her role as a mistress. The double standard unfolds as the reader examines Shug's role critically. Men of this same era do not have the promiscuous label attached to them when they are sexually active with multiple partners. On the surface, Shug represents women that realize they are only accepted by men because of their ability to supply physical needs.

As Shug contributes to the desires of men, she becomes a casualty of the patriarchy. As years pass, Shug continue to victimize herself because she is used to the patriarchal role of only being useful to men for sex: "I'm gitting old. I'm fat. Nobody think I'm good looking no more, but you" (257). Shug is so used to men longing for her; she is starting to feel undesirable when she thinks men no longer yearn for her affection.

Through the development of Shug, Walker proves that all women can become victims to the double standards of patriarchy in which what is suitable for men is unacceptable for women. In addition to the double standards that accompany sexual encounter, Shug eventually becomes married and takes on the position of homemaker and cook. Shug's getting married, after being so licentious, shows that she yearns for the continuous dedication of one man, which ironically reflects some of the conventional ethos associated with women living under patriarchy. However, even
though she wants the affection of one man, she is still a victim of the patriarchy because she transforms into a submissive woman catering to her husband. In her own words, “Mr.____ drink all through Christmas. Him and Grady. Me and Shug cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk” (114). Shug becomes even more entranced by the patriarchal lifestyle that allows her to take care of her husband, while Grady (her husband) relaxes and drinks all day. Walker presents the thought that double standards and male superiority collude to impede her character’s lives at any point in their lives.

In order to combat the double standards, the myth of male superiority, and the abuses that stifle Celie and Shug, Walker gives a transitioning moment that epitomizes their strength and will to persevere. Celie is able to find strength against the adversities that prevent her from being a decision-maker in her own life by confronting Mr.____:

You lowdown dog...It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. You took my sister Nettie away from me... And she was the only person love me in the world... But Nettie and my children coming home soon...And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass. I got children... a heap better than the fools you didn’t even try to raise...You was all rotten children...You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain’t dead horse shit. Mr.____ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand...You not getting a penny of my money, Mr. ____say to me. Not one thin
Celie is able to release all the tension and pain that she faces through the double standards, the myth of male superiority, and the abuses that govern her life. The strength that Celie projects is the catalyst for change that enables her to function and grow in society. She is able to confront her victimizer and take control of her life. Her will to walk away from this oppression and start her life anew proves her strength and vigor as a woman who has prevailed over adversity. Walker presents Celie becoming a womanist because Celie is now exhibiting self-determination and commitment to the survival of women. She is able to fight for herself and stand against her oppressors:

I curse you... until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble... Until you do right by me... everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees... Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice... The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot... Anything you do to me, already done to you... I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here. (213-214)

Celie purges all the resentment that she feels for a man of the patriarchy at that moment. Walker allows her to eradicate all the grief and turmoil that besieges her.

Celie's pivotal confrontation with Mr. ___ offers a transformation in her life that allows her to live according to her standards, contrary to the conventions set for her by a patriarchal society.
Like Celie, Shug also experiences moments that allow her to grow as a woman, fighting the double standards put forth by patriarchy. Although Shug begins her life as a victim of patriarchy, however because of the disgrace that accompanies being sexually submissive to men, she begins to speak out against the weak nature in men:

"Turn loose my goddam hand, she say to Mr.____. What the matter with you, you crazy? . . . I don’t need no weak little boy can’t say no to his daddy hanging on me. I need me a man, she say. A man. She look at him and roll her eyes and laugh" (49). She belittles Mr. ____ because she is able to see his vulnerable attributes, which is his lack of ability to confront his father. She also resents Mr.____ for not "choosing" her. Shug has an epiphany that allows her to understand the emotional abuse that she is receiving from Mr.____ as well as the abuse that she is inflicting on herself:

And when I come here. . . I treated you (Celie) so mean. Like you was a servant.

And all because Albert married you. And I didn’t even want him for a husband...

I never really wanted Albert for a husband, But just to choose me, you know, cause nature had already done it. Nature said, You two folks, hook up, cause you a good example of how it sposed to go. I didn’t want nothing to be able to go against that. But what was good tween us must have been nothing but bodies . . . . (128)

Shug finally realizes that she is allowing herself to be submissive to a man who has not respected her enough to marry her. She has a self-realization moment that allows her to
release all the jealousy that she projects on to Celie. At this moment Shug realizes that she always knew Albert to be a victimizer, but simply turned a “blind eye” to her victimization. Once Shug has this epiphany, she is able to completely embrace her womanhood and is no longer a victim to the double standards that plague the patriarchy.

The language that Walker deploys in the last few pages of the novel helps to demonstrate how successful Walker has been in using Celie and Shug to interrogate the oppression and the stigmas that plague women in the patriarchy. Walker subverts the double standards, the myth of male superiority, and the abuses that afflict the growth of women. The power roles have been altered as Celie is able stand up for herself and becomes a decision-maker and organizer in her community. Her ability to become a leader in her community by eventually becoming a business owner and a philanthropist in her community continues to reflect Walker’s theory of womanism. Like a womanist, Celie is able to stretch her gender boundaries while being able to maintain her connection with the rest of humanity. Celie’s growth is reflective of new persona and internal spirit, which she connects to others in her community. Shug is now able to embrace and express her individuality. She becomes the opposition to oppression and takes on traits of a “man:”

Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmonst… You know Shug will fight… She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what. Mr.____
think all this stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I (Celie) tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. (276)

Shug now does what she wants on her own terms and has no reservations about her choices. She is now living life for herself and is not held down by the double standards of the patriarchy. As she welcomes her individuality, she is able to help Celie accept hers. The growth that these women go through exhibits Walker’s notion that women from all walks of life can subvert the hardships of patriarchy and turn the system’s double standards, the idea of male superiority, and the abuses they experience into a positive energy and become agents of social change.
CHAPTER 4
STANDING UP FOR SELF AND THE COMMUNITY IN SULA

Toni Morrison’s Sula shows the strength of black women and their ability to withstand the adversities of patriarchy. Sula and Eva, two prominent characters in Morrison’s novel, suffer from the victimization of patriarchy, even though the victimization may sometimes be self-inflicted. In trying to please the men in their lives, or trying to get a man to stay with them, these characters unwittingly submit to patriarchy. Sula, for instance, subjects herself to patriarchy when she falls for Ajax. He is the one person that is able to get Sula’s complete attention. Sula is not one to make her decisions based on a man’s preferences or actions, but Ajax is able to control her and make her submit to feelings that she typically rejects, feelings that circumscribe women’s roles under patriarchy:

She had not counted on the footsteps on the porch, and the beautiful black face that stared at her though the blue-glass window. Ajax… Sula watched him… with growing interest... He can regularly then... If she could have thought of a place to go, she probably would have left, but that was before Ajax looked at her through the blue glass… (124-125,127)

Ajax is a weakness to Sula. She becomes submissive to him and his needs. She begins to base her decisions on his actions. Sula becomes the epitome of a submissive woman
in a patriarchal society. Her submission to Ajax is one element that makes her life flawed, for it is indicative of her subservience to a system she would rather be at war with. However, this submissive behavior also presents her as a meek woman because she completely throws herself into every action that Ajax undertakes. She soon begins to wonder about his whereabouts and is consumed by the thoughts of him coming to visit her. Sula is lost in a man, which is one of the standards for women in patriarchy. Morrison shows that Sula can be a victim of patriarchy even though she typically has a domineering manner.

Although Sula is clearly submissive in her relations with Ajax, she however rejects the conventional responsibilities and roles of womanhood and motherhood. She rejects womanhood as she allows her mother to burn to death and not assist in saving her life. She watches her mother submit to patriarchy by becoming submissive to men; instead of continuing to watch her mother acquiesce to the submissive standards set forth for women in the 1920s, Sula instead prefers to watch her mother die. Sula’s controversial actions suggest that she is fighting womanhood and all the subservient behavior that comes with it. Sula is willing to allow her mother to succumb to death than allow her (Sula’s mother) to continue to be victimized by the system of patriarchy.

Sula continues to wrestle with the standards of patriarchy by fighting the motherhood role that Eva represents. Eva nurtures all people that come around her, as a mother does with her children. Sula has resentment toward Eva because Eva wants Sula to make good decisions with her life, as a mother figure would want for any of her children. Sula does not like anyone questioning her actions, as is often the case in a
patriarchal society in which women are told what steps they should follow in life. Instead of embracing Eva’s view of life, Sula reinforces her rejection of patriarchy by committing Eva to a nursing home. In Sula’s words, “In April two men came with a stretcher and she didn’t even have time to comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas” (94). Eva’s admission to a nursing home is taking away her freedom and her desire for womanhood and motherhood. Sula make this conscious decision to commit Eva to the nursing home to show Eva that she will no longer be able to control Sula’s life and make her submit to the norms of patriarchy. Through all of the controversial actions that Sula executes on the women in her family, she proves to be a strong representation of a woman prevailing over patriarchy, even though her actions are unconventional and sometimes bother on insanity. To understand this almost insane behavior, one needs to recall Sula’s background. In a New York Times Book Review on Sula, Sarah Blackburn describes the background very well:

The heroine, Sula, grows up in a household pulsing with larger-than-life people and activity, presided over by her powerful and probably sorcerous grandmother. Her gentle mother is devoted almost wholly to the practice and pleasure of sensuality. But her cherished friend Nel, the local goody-goody, plays perfect counterpoint to Sula’s intense, life-grabbing insistence on freedom. It’s this insistence that eventually gets read as recklessness, and Sula becomes a threat as her life unfolds against the rest of the black community’s daily life of hardship, humiliation and scrabbling for survival. (7)
Sula is independent, strong-willed, living life according to her own rules; she loves and lives for her own happiness. Even as Sula dies, she is able to fight against the double standards and the abuse that she has always tried to fight against. She stands firm in her belief that she has made smart decisions and is a strong woman:

“Hey, girl.” Nel (Sula’s good friend) paused and turned her head but not enough to see her. “How you know?” Sula asked. “Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her. “About who was good. How you know it was you?” “What you mean?”

“I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me.” (146)

Sula is firm in all of her decisions and has no hesitations in her actions. Morrison shows the strong will of a woman determined to fight against patriarchy and all of its afflictions. The fight was not easy for Sula; it damaged her. Roberta Rubenstein paints the picture of Sula’s life perfectly when she writes: “Later, Sula becomes figuratively “one-eyed and dismembered, lacking a basic sense of connection to others and to the community. While people see themselves more clearly through her, she cannot see herself” (131).

Morrison presents Eva, on the other hand, as a heavily victimized woman of the patriarchy, who constantly deals with male superiority and abuse. On one level, Eva comes across as a woman that wants to live her life to support her family and nurture the growth of her community, which is the standard perception of what a woman should be in the patriarchy. However, she falls victim to the double standards of patriarchy
when she is forced to take on leadership roles in her family when her husband proves his inability to be the provider for the family:

After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage BoyBoy (Eva’s husband) took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. (32)

The absence of her husband in the family causes Eva to be the sole decision-maker, which is contrary to the conventional standards of patriarchy. Morrison presents this perspective of Eva to reflect the adversities of women during the 1920’s. Women during this period worked hard in the home and frequently struggled to prevail in the face of adversity. In the same way, Eva had to find a way to prosper and support her children:

When he left in November, Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it. (32)

Eva does not have the luxury of waiting for change; she realizes that she is going to have to put her anguish to the side, and create greatness for herself and her family. She must become a leader and decision maker in spite of the abuse and lack of leadership or supports that she encounters from her husband. Executing this new management role,
which is typically a position for men, is a situation that many women are not prepared for because of external factors that allowed men during the twentieth century to enforce “economical and psychological controls” through “physical intimidation ... as an important instrument of controlling women’s freedom of action ...” (Bland 446). Many women are not equipped with the psychological capability to prevail in a patriarchal society that often places constraints upon them.

Women like Eva revert back to leaning on the men that put them in the problematic circumstance that they find themselves in the first place. Women often “forget” what abuse they were once subjected to because of their need to be “saved” from the struggles or adversities of patriarchy. Morrison presents Eva as someone battling this same dilemma through this description: “BoyBoy came back to town and paid her (Eva) a visit. When Eva got the word that he was on his way, she made some lemonade ... He opened the door and stood smiling, a picture of prosperity and good will” (35). Eva’s willingness to make lemonade for BoyBoy suggests that she is eager and willing to welcome a self-centered character that no self-respecting woman should put up with; he is the one that puts her in despair. BoyBoy’s dismissive nature toward the pain and strife that he places on Eva shows that men who enjoy the privileges of patriarchy expect women to accept them and welcome them with open arms, despite their shortcomings or stupidity. Morrison presents the paradoxes of patriarchy in which men are supposed to be superior but do the silliest things to their family; and women are used to accepting these paradoxes. The sorrows that men inflict on women through the myth of male superiority help to perpetuate hierarchy and the abuse that women
experience. The fact that many women are struggle to survive patriarchy, and subvert it by maintaining a stoic persona, is a perspective that Morrison is trying to present through Eva.

Interestingly enough, Eva is able to transition out of the difficulties of male superiority by learning from the turmoil and the sorrows she experiences when dealing with BoyBoy. She releases all the pain that she goes through with BoyBoy the moment she sees that he has taken another lover:

...he leaned forward and whispered into the ear of the woman in the green dress... It hit her (Eva) like a sledge hammer, and it was then that she knew what to feel. A liquid trail hate flooded her chest. Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation... Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities. (36)

Eva regains her strength back and is able to prosper in her community as a strong woman who refuses to remain stagnant under the system of patriarchy. All of her experiences from that moment on are reflective of the woman Eva wants to be in life. She refuses to allow any man break her spirit and stagger her growth. All of her interactions with men are on her standards and according to her rules. Her ability to stand firm is instilled in her daughters. Eva is able to lead by example and teaches her
daughters to not hate men, but to love men for their purpose in each woman’s life:

“those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it . . . The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake” (41). Eva is able to love men for the purposes she gives them. Eva refuses to succumb to male superiority or abuse again. She only allows herself to receive the treatment she “invites” into her life. Morrison gives women the strength and will to survive male superiority and abuse through the actions of Eva.

Morrison presents a number of controversial situations in Sula, but all of the circumstances are important in presenting the significance of subverting male superiority, double standards, and abuse that continues to plague women. Sula and Eva fight these adversities to help save their family. Morrison portrays these issues to give a voice to all the women that are not able to physically be a “Sula” or an “Eva.” It is important to Morrison to let the women of the twentieth century and beyond know that they do not have to submit to the standards of a patriarchal society. It is more vital to prevail in society as a strong woman that is able to stand against the dominant factors that often hold women back from achieving their goals. Through Sula, Morrison portrays the strength, perseverance, and determination that reside in many women. Morrison is giving a voice to these women and showing them how to become leaders and decision-makers in their communities, while fighting against male superiority, double standards, and abuse.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The maturity process that helps mold the different stages in a woman’s life and helps her growth or transformation varies from woman to woman. Similarly, the complexity of a woman’s journey through life full of adversity also varies from woman to woman. It is obvious however that growth, whether for communal or individual purposes, is significant in a woman’s life as she journeys through adversity in a patriarchal society. In this study, I examined three women writers, Cather, Walker, and Morrison, and their approaches in mirroring the adversities of a patriarchal society through the existential struggles of their main characters, Antonia, Celie, Shug, Sula and Eva. This study has shown how the main characters in the various works have tried to prevail against the system of patriarchy, which forces them to encounter the prejudice of male superiority, doubles standards, and abuse.

The authors discussed in this study have tried to challenge the abuses of patriarchy and the system’s destructive influence on women. The lack of recognition for women in a patriarchal society, as the works have shown, breeds a “silent” revolution and an uprising in which women must stand firm for their position in life. The privileges of patriarchy cannot be offered to all people, least of all women. Women must demand for it just as some of the characters in this study have done.
The revolt against patriarchy is one of the enduring qualities of Cather's *My Antonia*. The role reversal that the author uses to give a voice to women in the novel may be considered outlandish and rebellious, but her ability to cause a transformation and development in the roles of women allows the reader to appreciate the stance of Antonia, the main character. The stance is a reflection of the transformational abilities of women—the abilities to reform and transform their condition. Cather’s feminist approach gives the reader a consciousness of the strength and courage of women in very challenging circumstances, in spite of society’s hierarchy.

Walker’s theory on womanism invokes the belief that black communities have been built on the strength of black women. This theory is also well demonstrated in her novel, *The Color Purple*. Walker perpetuates the idea that black women should be recognized for their struggles and the tribulations they have experienced through their efforts at building communities and the nation, while being able to raise the black family at the same time. Walker is able to give a voice to her characters that allow them to fight against oppression and victimization.

Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, strongly represents the characteristics of what a feminist (Sula) and a womanist (Eva) are to a society. Morrison’s ability to convey these qualities through these two characters helps to dramatize their experiences through a fictional lens. It is no surprise then that the Medallion society rewards her feminist trait of focusing on what is absent rather than what is present in women and her community. *Sula* shows how women are impacted and damaged by the different interactions they have with men, family, and their society.
When dealing with a patriarchal society, women inevitably deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of the system of patriarchy. Even as women confront the double standards and the abuse of the system they are constrained by their own choices—that is, whether to conform with or go against what a man feels a woman should represent. This is the reality of patriarchy. The authors I have discussed in this study (Cather, Walker, and Morrison) show characters that illustrate women who consciously or subconsciously accept the reality, while showing the consequences of denying this reality. Overall, each author shows what it is to be a real woman versus what it is to dream of one day becoming one. These novels indicate the many qualities, as well as psychological and sexual disorders, that a woman acquires as she struggles against patriarchy. The battle against patriarchy may even consume its victims.
REFERENCES


