

Sickness, Family, Love and Today's America: A Study of Miss Janie's Girls by Carolyn Brown

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ABSTRACT

Susan Sontag writes in "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. The present study is about combating illness that is not ordinary but huge one as cancer or Alzheimer's and the emotional need of care by the dear and near ones in the fight against disease. It is being highlighted here by the critical analysis of Carolyn Brown's latest novel Miss Janie's Girls. This study is important in the context of pandemic COVID-19 that has focused on social distancing while the need is of care by the close family members during sickness. This study explores the connection between combating a fatal disease and feminism, and for that it brings a comparative analysis of Toni Morrison's novel Love. The impact of changed lifestyle in today's America on family relations with a new emphasis on family love is highlighted in combating illness; while the family also includes adopted children and fostered mothers.

Keywords: Combating illness, Family love, Feminism, Adopted daughters, Female bonding

INTRODUCTION

In the present times, we are living in an urban modern or post-modern world, as the more than half of the world population is living in the cities. Thus, this century is, no doubt, "the urban century". This urbanization, modernization and technological advancements have created many challenges of various natures as economic problems, health issues, social concerns and psychological illness of various kinds [1]. Under these new circumstances the life is totally changed. The present study deals with the issue of family, family love, psychological needs of sharing and caring in face of fear of a pandemic or incurable sickness as cancer. The recently published novel *Miss Janie's Girls* by Carolyn Brown shows the importance of family while facing a big challenge of fatal disease as cancer [2,3]. The worldwide pandemic COVID-19 that has reached every part of the world has most devastating effects in the cities. The pandemic has caused so many casualties of lives that those are left behind have suffered from grief and unwarranted circumstances. This study is important especially in the context of pandemic Corvid-19 that has exerted unforgettable effects on families and the elders at home throughout the world. The focus of this study is multifold: Health issues, social concerns in today's modern life in America and psychological challenges in the families in combating the diseases that can take life as COVID-19.

There are certain books written combating the fatal diseases. One such book is *Illness as Metaphor* by Susan Sontag. Sontag writes, "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place [1]". The writer Sontag talks about cancer and tuberculosis, and in then she writes on the issue of AIDS. The writer does not talk much about the physical illness but about the way the society responds to these diseases and misconceptions as well as stereotypical attitudes of the people about fatal diseases. *The Cancer Journals* [4] by Audre Lorde brings for the writer's own experience about cancer. This collage of essays explores the juncture of breast cancer and feminism. Lorde focuses on the cultural pressure that the women have to face that they should look as "normal", and how her diagnosis is shaped by her identity as a black lesbian feminist poet.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As family structure changes, the family values do change as well. Pepper Schwartz, in the essay, "The Family as a Changed Institution", points out that the American family consists of voluntarily developed relations. Life partners can leave each other, and the children have their own associations outside the family to rely on. "The divorce rate is high as the women's rights and emphasis on self over community have created the flexible idea of family" [5]. Schwartz proposes that the traditional concept of family was destabilized on the basis of the code of enlightened self-interest and so the family idea is changed radically. Schwartz comments that in a family unit one must compromise his/her own self-interest for the mutual goodness of the whole family.

Materialism is the foundation of modern lifestyle everywhere in the urban world. Spiritual welfare of human body is non-existent. It reminds me of the comments about modern city life by Jan Furman: "The city offers them with possibility, the chance to remake themselves in the images of their dreams ... but in giving themselves over to their dream selves, they become people neither recognized — a childless couple, alienated from community in big city" [6]. Although the critical remarks are made for Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, they shed light on Miss Janie and her fostered daughters' detachment in *Miss Janie's Girls*. *Miss Janie's Girls* is a passionate and appealing story abounding love and heartache. Miss Janie has poured down a lot of love when she adopted Teresa and Kayla. All three of them are from obnoxious homes specific of the modern city environment which gives more value to money and bodily desires.

Adoption has long been part of American child welfare practice and the centrality of its role has accelerated since the 1980s.[7] The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) adoption standards (2000) asserts to include information in legal documentation relating to applicants' emotional maturity, capacity to parent effectively, readiness to adopt, and reasons for pursuing adoption [7]. The present study includes the issue of adopted daughters and fostered mother in *Miss Janie's Girls* by New York Times bestseller writer Carolyn Brown. Through this novel the writer has shed light on the importance of female bonding in the time of crisis or combating of sickness. The female bonding is a central issue in Morrison's Novel [3] which is brought into critical analysis here to understand the importance of female friendship in *Miss Janie's Girls*.

Female bonding draws the attention of some theorists such as Clenora Hudson-Weems, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Carole Boyce Davies, Elizabeth Abel and Obioma Nnameka, who emphasize on women's relationships and friendship. Elizabeth Abel, for instance, reflects on female friendship: 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 [8]. Female friendship is, first and foremost, the friendship for women, hence a non-sexual relationship by nature based on giving and receiving emotional and moral support, sharing stories and experiences, caring and nurturing each other. This form of relationship may occur for any women including mother-daughter relationships or a public relation formed among females. Clenora 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 [9].

Detached Female Bonding in Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) [3]

Love is the story of Bill Cosey, dead hotel landlord, and the women in relation with him. Cosey, at age of 52, marries Heed, an 11-year-old girl who is a friend of his granddaughter Christine. His daughter-in-law May, jealous of Heed, uses all her power to save her daughter, Christine, from Heed: Heed and Christine are good friends but became enemies because of this marriage. They grow hating each other and fight endlessly. Bill Cosey has been dead for twenty-five years but is still a very real presence to the women who share his life. While Heed, the beneficiary of her husband's will, lives a lonely life in the house's richly appointed upper floors, Christine resides in the small, spare basement apartment near the kitchen. Confined to the same house, they stay as far away from each other as possible because of the rift created by the patriarchal figure Bill Cosey. The bond between Heed and Christine in this novel does not survive the influence of patriarchy.

The destructive power of patriarchy destroys the friendship between the two girls. As soon as Heed becomes Cosey's wife, their friendship transforms into animosity. Thus the women in Cosey's family are in fact betrayed by Cosey: they wage war against each other for Cosey but he respects none of them in his life. The women could not succeed in their mutual sisterhood love. Heed, Christine and Junior are bound to each other in a triangular structure that may support a unity between the three women; however, their relationship does not grow.

In *Love*, the female characters lack parenting and subsequently lack healthy development of their personalities due to the inability of their families to nurture them. The estrangement in female friendship in this novel has its roots in the feelings of abandonment experienced by each female under the conception of family. Familial abandonment creates emotional instability and vulnerability among the women, causing them to seek

external agency, or control, over their lives. Without paternal and maternal figures to guide them, they continue to adhere to the disrupting structures that have shaped their identities. Lack of parenting affects the psyches of these women. The fact that the women's psychological development may have been unfulfilled explains why they so aggressively seek approval and search for validation from the father, even overcompensating for the love they have never received with overt heterosexual behavior. When the women find a common source of validation, rivalry occurs, obscuring the unity that exists between the members of the female triad. Ultimately, the women are not able to deal with any crisis without relying on the strong homosocial bonds they share.

In addition, the sacrifice of Heed to Cosey's desires attests to the alienated mother-daughter relationship. Like Nel and Sula in Morrison's novel *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 the problematic mother-daughter relationship produces impact on these girls. Heed confesses her awareness of lack of motherlove in a discussion with Junior, her assistant and another female character who also suffers from a strained mother-daughter relationship. Explaining to Heed her experience, Junior readily admits, "And my mother didn't care a thing about me/Mine, neither" [3].

Reconciliation does not occur to Christine and Heed even long after the death of the agent of their oppression. When reconciliation finally occurs for Christine and Heed, it happens under desperate circumstances and is too late to produce any fruitful result. For the first time since Heed's marriage, they understand each other, as Christine reflects, "We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere" [3]. But this important realization comes far too late to make up for the years they have spent fighting. 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. Heed dies shortly after, leaving Christine alone.

Through exploring the psyches of these women in *Love*, Morrison provides a chart for the female readers to see the importance of female bonding in combatting any social or medical or other issue at hand. Morrison dramatizes the possibility of clearing up differences, but meanwhile makes it clear that this possibility may not come if it stays only with shallow sisterhood. bell 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" [10]. Morrison

herself seems to be a devout supporter of female friendship; she does not provide examples of a successful sisterhood in her novels. From the *Bluest Eye* to *Love*, Morrison exemplifies failed female friendships. However, Carolyn Brown shows successful female bonding in her novel *Miss Janie's Girls*.

Family reunion for combatting an elder's sickness in *Miss Janie's Girls* [2]

Miss Janie's Girls (2020) [2] is a novel that deals with a story of a fostered mother and her two adopted girls Kayla and Teresa. Its setting is a town in Texas. The girls after growing to a proper age leave their fostered mother for a city life with more excitements showing an extreme level of selfishness. Until now the story has similarity with another of Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* [11]. In this novel, Milkman follows the steps of his father and grandfather who have also alienation in their gender relations for material reasons. Milkman's own words for his father resonate his father's situation: "As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess [11]. The desire for gold in Milkman has its roots in the capitalistic ambience around, as the narrator says: "He wanted the money—desperately, he believed" [11]. This mad search for wealth makes Milkman blind to the love of Hagar who dies crying for him. But in *Miss Janie's Girls* the writer brings the family reunion by ending the selfishness of the young girls.

In Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the character who shows alienation from love are male-Milkman Dead and his father and grandfather. But in Carolyn Brown's *Miss Janie's Girls* the writer has shifted the focus from male- female to female relationship in the families. And the writer has a special reason for her selection of females as the central characters in this novel. Carolyn's concerns include female independence and autonomy that cannot be achieved without mutual cooperative participation of females. Indeed, female cooperation helps to provide the females with a sense of autonomy and persistence to have a blissful family. Thus, without caring for the old lady, both the girls left Janie and never thought to come back to her which a big shock for Miss Janie. However later on, after a long time, with the help of Noah, the nephew of the old lady, Kayla and Teresa both come back to Texas to look after Miss Janie as she's suffering from cancer and is at the brim of death.

In a sense, *Miss Janie's Girls* represents Carolyn Brown's reflection on the idea of identification for elder people in today's America. The complication and ambiguity the writer discloses in this novel is reflected in the issue of identification, namely, to identify with the prosperous but cold-hearted capitalist society or the nurturing family communal connection. The main characters have made

their choices, but once the choices are made, they begin to miss family love in their lives. The girls choose their way of departure from home culture only to suffer from estrangement with the urban society, to be troubled by her detachment from their own family roots. By portraying the alienation in family relations of the central characters on account of their attachment to modern standards of free life and detachment from their home sweet home, the tries to disclose the complexity involved for the youngsters to seek identification on their way to reunion with their families. The “revolt from the family” was a movement in modern America but it needs to be replaced with “reunion with family” movement, with a set of antitheses connected with the ideas of the city and self-centeredness.

The cold impersonality of the new lifestyle is contrasted with the ‘togetherness’ of the family. The vice of the family breakdown has collapsed the innocent simplicity of the family life. Borrowing the term from Channel Hilfer, a need for “mental escape” [12] in a time of rapid change (urbanization, industrialization, etc.) is needed for accepting the glorification of the family values. From this perspective, Carolyn could be read as participating in this “reunion with family” movement against “revolt from the family” movement. She does not adopt the tactic of idealizing the rural setting at the expense of the urban environment for the adoption of family values. Rather, she tries her own way of reading into this complicated process through development of characterization in this novel, particularly involving the element of identification with the human values of compassion and care.

The alienation from love and relations has been seen as a prerequisite to move forward on the way of progress in the capitalistic city milieu away from family. However, it becomes clear that the writer Carolyn Brown does not favor detachment from family love. The characters tend to show an estrangement from family because such as attachment may demand care and responsibility but that should be taken as part of life. She brings a new vision that there should remain no need of “old homes” in the days to come in America.

What is important for a modern reader is not only the treatment of cancer and tending of the old lady to take care of her medical needs but the more important is the emotional need of the old mother. Other than cancer, another sickness borne by Miss Janie is Alzheimer’s and this the old sick lady needs that the three of them live together for the rest of their lives and she gets comfort and pleasure by this reunion. Unlike the female characters in Morrison, who are hurt by males, the women in Carolyn Brown’s *Miss Janie’s Girls* are thoroughly happy with one another before leaving home and after coming back home. The story is sad but inscribed in such a way that you have smiles and get hope. The book gives you happiness but makes you to cry too when it ends. Thus, it is a bittersweet

book. The story is wonderfully penned down, highlighting the two generations of women and the change of world for the women over the span of many years. It may be taken as an eye opener for the teenagers to show them the experiences of their grandmothers in today’s world. It brings us back to the concept of home and family as home is the best place for showing love and be loved, for taking care and being cared.

One may not like Kayla or Teresa in the first look, but their characters develop, and they also learn a lot about their own selves and become mature, develop the importance of family and belonging. Carolyn Brown is not a pessimistic writer, as she believes that things can turn better if the alienated self can reconnect with other people and restore human relations. The city has created in him the love of gold. It is his stay in the country that inculcates in him a feeling for other people. Both the girls Kayla or Teresa remember their fostered mother Miss Janie, her bright faced inspiring smile, her working in the kitchen for making food for them. The best years of their life, from early age to sixteen years, had been with Miss Janie. Now it seems to them that their going away for selfish reasons would have affected her. Going away from her seems silly now. Their minds turn to Miss Janie, her love and her craziness for them. Having liberated from the shallowness of material pursuits and self-centeredness which has previously characterized them dissolves and they start to have self-analysis. They remain no longer oblivious of a purpose or direction of his life in the city-caring and loving those who love you.

Carolyn Brown brings forth the issue of choice between the two opposing forces: love and capital. Miss Janie is in love with her daughters with all her soul. Meanwhile, her daughters are alienated from her who is of no use for them. They want to enjoy a high-class life in the city. The real problem is class of material selfishness versus love. They all had affection and were ready to live with each. But the capitalistic city milieu reacts with a force, as they have to make a choice between their mother’s love and their personal freedom, and they eventually separate. Their decision to leave her lover for their independent future success highlights a girl’s mode of life away from mother love to be successful in the modern capitalistic world, to achieve freedom and achieving the status of free autonomous subjects. The writer believes in the importance of modern education and new forms of culture, but she also wants her readers to realize the need of family love. The girls choose the modern world free from family care by going away from their mother. These female characters come together under family love that shatters but then they reunite in harmony with one another and in the end, they find no difficulty in being synthesized as one whole family unit. This novel brings forth an insight into the complication and ambiguity involved in the pursuit of self-knowledge by the modern American citizens. Both the girls

move forward in such a way that past relation with mother Miss Janie does not hinder them from pursuing success in the corporate world.

CONCLUSION

Women friends provide for each other dependability that goes beyond the concern for self and is an attempt to help and elevate each other. Carolyn Brown describes this form of relationships in this novel *Miss Janie's Girls* as women characters develop bonds of family love among themselves. In fact, the women formulate a form of bonding that allows them to grow and develop themselves. The female bonding in Carolyn in this novel therefore involves two phases. First, female bonding starts and develops in response to some outside pressures, and then this bonding suffers setbacks as the result of the emergent alienation. Carolyn clearly highlights the solidarity that characterizes the female relationships.

The hard-economic situation of women transforms them into alienated citizens, but female bonding can conceivably function as a refuge where they may find comfort and sanctuary and heal the wounds from health or economic or other crises. The peculiarity of Carolyn is that she goes on to tell her readers that this female bonding may be inevitable in today's world. In old days it was patriarchy that was the enemy of female bonding as in Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) but in today's America it is the modern lifestyle that makes them alienated from each other. Carolyn then goes on to make her readers ask: is it good or bad to come out of their alienated family relations to develop female bonding and caring relationships?

Finally, this novel makes its readers to realize the pain being felt by the family of George Floyd, the black American who was killed recently while uttering the cry: I can't breathe as his family could not interact with him in the last moments of his life. Furthermore, this book highlights value of life and of the family, especially in the context of pandemic COVID-19 that has powerful effects on families and the elders at home. Summing up it is an account of forgiveness, of reawakening and of compensating for older mistakes and venerating the memory of an older lady with compassion and understanding.

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