Women and Voice in *Song of Solomon*

As the title of the book suggests, song is a rich and vital theme in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. Morrison, like other female African-American authors, uses writing to explore the relationship between women and voice. Most of the women in her novel have smothered their own identities, their voices, by depending on men for a sense of self. As a result, the silenced voice often seeks self-destructive or otherwise hurtful forms of expression. Though some women are able to regain their voices as the novel progresses, one woman maintains hers all along. Pilate’s song is her own. She can sing, both literally and figuratively, for two reasons: first, she has a strong personal identity separate from the numbing pressures of both men and society in general; second, she is connected with the spirit world.

Few women in *Song of Solomon* share Pilate’s strength. Like the protagonist in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, they must be silent to survive; the “only thing [they] could do was to stop talking” (Angelou 85). Morrison’s Ruth describes herself as a “small woman . . . pressed small” by circumstances (123–124). Throughout her life, she stifles her self-expression and relies on men for a sense of worth. A one-sentence description of her marriage illustrates this repression: “[She] began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it” (10). Such negative attention is better than no attention at all; her husband’s coldness gives Ruth a sadly distorted sense of purpose and self-worth. When her son arrives, Ruth transfers her unhealthy dependence to the child, trying to
nurture herself by breast-feeding him for years. Their relationship sums up her relationships with men in general, as demonstrated by her feelings while nursing him:

She felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. (13)

Nursing her son is the “balm” that Ruth needs to “get from sunup to sundown” (13). She sees herself as existing only in relation to husband and son, and she orders her life and her sense of self around them. She listens to male voices and reacts to them, but does not speak herself. Since Ruth has no voice of her own, no personal identity, she becomes an empty vehicle for whatever role men dictate.

Hagar, too, is silenced by men, but her stifled voice expresses itself in more destructive ways. She cannot withdraw into numb passivity like Ruth. Nor can she, like the silenced housewife in Opal Moore’s “A Happy Story,” turn to art and employ her creative if not her physical voice (Moore 274). Yet Hagar must express herself, and the only outlet she sees is violence. Her “graveyard love” for Milkman first freezes her voice (128). His goodbye letter

sent Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time, and where people spoke in whispers or did not make sounds at all, and where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest. (99)

It is impossible for Hagar to tell her lover how she feels; she has no identity from which to speak and is hardly aware of her own emotions. Instead, Hagar turns to physical violence, seemingly the only means of expression available to her. When she tries to take action and kill Milkman, however, she finds herself “paralyzed” by her obsessive love for him (130). Hagar’s intense and unexpressed emotion ultimately turns self-destructive and probably helps cause her death. She spends her last hours in a frantic, illusory search for clothes and cosmetics that will make Milkman love her again. This woman dies convinced that “[h]e loves . . . penny-colored hair . . . and lemon-colored skin” unlike her own (319); to Hagar, her African-American body and self are
worthless if they fail to attract Milkman. This woman, vibrant with creative potential, is fatally silenced by her dependence on a man.

Unlike Hagar and Ruth, Lena finds her voice as the novel progresses and begins forming her own identity. From childhood, Lena and her sister are silenced by their father, who “mangle[s] their grace, wit, and self-esteem” (10). Lena is saved from mimicking her mother Ruth’s passivity, however, because she finds her voice in a confrontation with her brother. While speaking with him about their childhood, she remembers how she used to sit and make artificial roses: “[Making roses] kept me . . . quiet. That’s why they make those people in the asylum weave baskets and make rag rugs. It keeps them quiet. If they didn’t have the baskets they might find out what’s really going on and . . . do something” (215—her ellipses). Realizing how she was silenced, Ruth confronts her brother and rejects the patriarchal domination under which she has been living:

You’ve been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us. . . . Where do you get the right to decide our lives? . . . I’ll tell you where. From that hog’s gut that hangs down between your legs. Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that. . . . I don’t make roses anymore, and you have pissed your last in this house. . . . Now . . . get out of my room. (216–218)

Lena’s new awareness makes her angry enough to speak out. She now claims the identity that was crushed by her father and brother. These men are no longer interacting with an echo, with a self always subordinate to their own; instead, they face a strong, self-aware individual demanding autonomy. Lena makes the step towards self-expression celebrated by poet Ntozake Shange:

we demand to be heard
we want you to hear us . . . our language shd
let you know who’s talkin, what we’re talkin abt & how we cant stop sayin this to you
(“taking a solo/a poetic possibility/a poetic imperative”)

Pilate is set apart from the other women in the novel because she maintains a distinctive identity all along, expressing herself though song and through wise, direct speech. Pilate keeps her own literal and figurative voice for two reasons. First, she has a sense of personal
identity that does not depend on men or society for validation. Like most African-Americans of her era, Pilate lacks a documented, societally recognized history; so, she chronicles her own history instead. As she journeys around the country, she collects talismans to carry with her—rocks, thread, a geography book (144–145). Most importantly, she always wears her name. Written on a scrap of paper by her father, it travels with her inside her earring, which itself is a small brass snuffbox belonging to her mother (168). This tangible reminder of personal history gives her strength. When Pilate finds that she is “isolated” from others, especially from men, because of her missing navel (149)—her mystifying lack of a biological history—she learns to give birth to herself, so to speak. She follows Shange’s injunction to “be our own children,” and learns to nurture and cherish her singular self:

After a while, she stopped worrying about her stomach and stopped trying to hide it. . . . [W]hen she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn’t want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? (148–149)

Pilate, isolated from the dominant culture by her color and from African-American communities by her peculiar anatomy, has to forge her own identity. She doesn’t depend on men—or on anyone else—because she knows her own worth. This woman lives life as she thinks best, unswayed by pressure to conform to an appropriate female role or to accept the subservient existence delineated for her by white society. Nourished by her own history, Pilate’s identity is tough and resilient. She has articulated a personal history and a sense of self, and thus can express her opinions and emotions through song.

But Pilate’s voice depends on something more: her spirituality. Her dead father, speaking to her from the spirit world, first tells her to “Sing” (148). Pilate has a deep connection with this realm, as shown by her friendly communication with her father’s spirit, as well as her use of spiritual song to mark important life events. At her granddaughter’s death, for example, she sings a spiritual and then begins to speak to the assembled congregation. Naming Hagar as her “baby girl,”
[c]onversationally she spoke, identifying her away from everybody else in the world who had died. . . . Suddenly, like an elephant who has just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength, Pilate trumped for the sky itself to hear, ‘And she was loved!’ (322–323)

Pilate has a gift for “talkin’ wit the unreal,” as Ntozake Shange writes (Shange 27). A character in her novel Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo sums this up: “What ya think music is, whatchu think the blues be, & them get happy church musics is all about, but talkin’ wit the unreal what’s mo’ real than most folks ever gonna know” (Shange 27). This relationship between Pilate’s voice and spirituality is reciprocal: Pilate can sing because she is spiritually rooted, and the act of singing reinforces this spiritual connection. Her spirituality is both the base and the product of a secure identity. Whether it sounds like “little round pebbles that [bump] up against each other” (Morrison 40), or like the trumpet of an elephant, Pilate’s voice reverberates throughout Song of Solomon.

By writing this novel, Toni Morrison is using her own voice. She adds it to the voices of African-American women before her, joining the mothers humming lullabies, the field hands with their subversive chants, the blues singers, the gospel choirs, the poets and writers and storytellers. Through their expression, these women chronicle a history not only for themselves but for their culture. Like Pilate, they realize that the act of creative expression nourishes the identity from which it springs. Often, such a personal identity—as an artist, as an African-American woman—helps articulate and strengthen the collective cultural identity as well. As Alice Walker writes, “[I]t is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together” (Walker 205–206).

Works Cited


