The Common Household Prison In Toni Morrison’s Song Of Solomon

In Song of Solomon oppression takes on various forms, the most prevalent being racial oppression, or so it seems. The author Toni Morrison laces the oppression of women throughout the plot in a way that is not clearly evident at face value but is concrete upon detailed analysis. The system of patriarchy that exists defines women’s role as the caretaker of the house, the children, and the men; which places their focus on everyone but themselves. Morrison demonstrates the negative impacts that patriarchal culture has on women in order to challenge these ideals which are deep-rooted in society today. In Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison, the author uses relationships between men and women to reveal how the patriarchy, which is maintained through traditions and societal norms, causes the destruction of women's self-image and sanity at the expense of men’s success.

Traditions like songs and familial teachings are one of the modes used in the novel as a way to uphold expectations for the roles of women. Toni Morrison repeatedly uses songs as a means to represent a tradition that is passed from generation to generation. At the beginning of the novel, the song's lyrics are “Sugarman done gone” (Morrison 9) whereas, in the end, it is “Solomon done gone” (303), demonstrating a shift in the subject but not the content. The lack of thematic change in the songs illustrates how their content, which alludes to the idea of women’s abandonment by men, has not faded despite the chronological shift. Another mode that gender roles are maintained is through familial teachings which uphold traditional values. This is seen through the passing down of values from Macon II to Milkman. Macon enforces the value of ownership including the ownership of “other people” (55). This statement displays the ideals of masculinity and patriarchy that are taught to Milkman as he approaches manhood. As a result of these teachings, Milkman then subconsciously embodies the ideals and values of gender roles that his father upholds. Along with traditions, societal norms continue to force and secure the roles of women. Corinthians and Lena are seen to mindlessly make artificial roses as this is what is expected of them. It is an unspoken expectation that girls stay at home while the men perform the real business outside of the house. Although real roses are often associated with love and happiness, these artificial roses represent the opposite. The roses that they make are described as “bright, lifeless” (10), revealing a complex dynamic between two contrasting descriptions. Although the roses may appear bright in color, they truly remind Corinthians and Lena “of death” (198), more specifically their own. The making of artificial roses is a symbol of the endless belittling tasks that women are expected to perform. This task may be interpreted as bright and lively, but Morrison reveals the dark and degrading aspects of it. The same societal norms reinforce ideas of how women should dress to impress men. Products in the women's beauty industry display ideals of the perfect woman. Hagar comes across a perfume bottle that is labeled as “Myrurgia for a primeval woman who creates for him a world for tender privacy” (311). The label reveals how in an ideal world women live to create a better world for men. Beauty products, in reality, should be for making a woman feel better about herself, but Morrison's specific description of the label reveals that the beauty industry has been instilled for the purpose of serving men's needs. Patriarchy is indoctrinated in society through traditional teachings and the beauty industry; these ideals lead to women's lack of self-direction and worth.

Morrison demonstrates the damage that internalizing societal expectations has on women

through various relationships in the novel. As women embody their role as the standard housewife, they tend to lose sight of who they are as an individual and become trapped in the patriarchal system. Hagar devotes herself to Milkman and when he leaves her she no longer is able to cope with her life in the absence of him. Hagar says, “he don’t like hair like mine” (315), without ever receiving concrete evidence that this is the reason Milkman left her. This quote reveals Hagar’s falsely construed self-image that is a result of societal expectations of beauty. In addition, Hagar turns to criticize herself rather than Milkman due to his more powerful status as a man. Morrison uses Hagar's critique of herself to display the damaging effects this system of oppression has on women. The role Hagar has accepted as a women acts to make her “a puppet strung up by a puppet master” (301). A clear image of Hagar being controlled by someone is evoked through this quote. The puppet master that is referred to is the gender roles established or more specifically, Milkman himself. The use of the comparison of Hagar to a puppet is crucial as it enforces the idea that these gender roles do not allow women to live for themselves. Puppets are inherently used for the entertainment of others, which may also point to the underlying message that Hagar is performing all acts for the enjoyment of others rather than for herself. Generational similarities can be seen through Ruth and Hagar. Ruth is compared to a “prisoner automatically searching out the sun as he steps into the yard for his hour of exercise” (11) as she similarly searches for the watermark on her dining table several times a day. This watermark reminds Ruth of her father, who she is dependent on for validation as is Hagar to Milkman. This simile suggests that Ruth is like a prisoner, trapped by the need for the dependency that she once had on her father. Although her father is dead, this table is stained, as is she by this relationship that does not allow Ruth to be free to live for her own enjoyment. The house that Ruth lives in is described as “more prison than palace” (10). The repetitive comparison of the household as a prison and Ruth as the prisoner is used to signify the entrapment of women that patriarchy has instilled upon them. Although Ruth lives in a bigger house than most other houses in her neighborhood, the wealth that she possesses does not prevent the oppression of her as a woman. Morrison paints the common household as a place of the destruction of women. It is where they are expected to perform tasks that do not improve their self wellness rather improve everyone else's. Both Ruth and Hagar lose sight of how they can achieve happiness and purpose through means which do not revolve around the men in their life. Throughout the novel, women are continually described as deteriorating as the men in their life abandon them in acts to free themselves from their life circumstances.

In multiple instances, men are commended for their acts of self-liberation at the expense of the women who have internalized the role of providing endlessly for them. These acts of liberation comment on the selfish condition that is socially acceptable for men. Imagery and actual attempts of flight are presented throughout the novel specifically by men. Guitar corrects Milkman for mistaking a peacock as a girl by saying “that's a he” (178). The guitar does this to ensure that Milkman understands that “the male is the only one got that tail” (178); implying the importance of the tail is that it enables the male peacock to be capable of flight. The use of the peacock to secure the fact that men are only capable of flight gives this gender-specific role a natural quality, implying that it is set in nature as true. Another instance in which male flight is seen as natural is when Milkman dreams of his own flight “in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper” (298). The imagery of a man on a couch suggests that flight for men is as easy and second nature as laying on the couch, something they do in their everyday life. Morrison’s description alludes to flight as an intrinsic act for men due to the social ranking that allows them to fulfill all of their wants and needs without repercussions. Repeatedly, men are seen as heroic because of their attempts at flight. Milkman is beyond exhilarated at the thought that his “great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy” (328). This excitement is exerted through

this exaggerated spelling of fly as well as Milkman’s non-stop talking about the topic. Milkman’s inability to recognize the harm which Solomon’s flight has caused on Ryna is then reflected through his relationship with Hagar. Flight by men in the novel is attached to the downfall of women in numerous instances. The repetition of this condition enforces the prevalence of gender roles in women's lives. Solomon’s song is one of the repeated modes implying that as men free themselves from their reality, they often leave behind the women in their lives. “Solomon doesn’t leave me here” (303) comments on the desperation and downfall of the women as the men leave in their own acts of flight. The liberation which the men feel is balanced by the destruction that the women experience. The women that are left behind by the men's flight are described as having “lost their minds, or died or something” (323). The deaths of Ryna and Hagar both follow the series of events started by Solomon’s song. Although the circumstances that lead to the self-destruction of these two women differ greatly, their reactions align very closely. This similarity is due to the gender roles that have transcended generations and caused women to lose the sense of direction and self-fulfillment in the absence of men.

In Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, the oppression of women is created through a patriarchal system. This oppression of women disallows them to perform roles other than what is expected of them. As women accept the oppression that is forced upon them, they may develop a lack of self-worth and sanity. Familial traditions and the beauty industry act to maintain women’s proper roles in relationship to those around them, mostly men. Men’s natural tendency to seek freedom from their current circumstances is repeatedly described through the use of flight. Flight is able to free one from their surroundings but also leaves behind those who can not fly. Morrison repeatedly describes men as being capable of flight, while women are imprisoned by this societal system of patriarchy. The condition of men’s freedom at the expense of women's entrapment is made apparent by Morrison. Morrison’s critique of the premeditated roles of men and women in her novel poses the discussion of how prevalent is this condition in today's society.