Motherhood and Morality under Capitalism: A Marxist Feminist Reading of Chopin's *The Awakening* and Morrison's *Sula*

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Citation: El Baba, S., & Hamadi, L. (2025). Motherhood and Morality Under Capitalism: A Marxist Feminist Reading of Chopin's The Awakening and Morrison's Sula. *Gloria: International Multidisciplinary Studies, 2*(1), 40-57. https://gloria-leb.org/MotherhoodandMoralityUnderCapitalism.htm

Abstract

This paper explores the themes of motherhood and morality within the context of capitalism, analyzing Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (2004/1973) through a Marxist feminist lens. It examines how capitalist structures exploit and constrain women, particularly in their roles as mothers, forcing them to navigate systemic inequalities that shape their identities and choices. Drawing on the works of Marxist and Marxist feminist theorists such as Marx, Engels, Federici, Luxemburg, Althusser, and Gramsci, the paper critically analyzes how capitalism dehumanizes individuals, perpetuates gender and racial oppression, and commodifies motherhood itself. Both novels reveal how mothers are stripped of autonomy, and how their moral decisions are shaped by a capitalist system that prioritizes profit and control over human dignity. By situating these narratives in the historical aftermaths of events like the American Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and World War I, the paper highlights how capitalism, indifferent to the lives of the oppressed, entrenches systemic inequities across race and gender. Ultimately, the paper contends that the morality of capitalism is laid bare as a system built on the devaluation of human life and the exploitation of mothers in pursuit of wealth and power.

Keywords: Motherhood – Morality – Capitalism – Marxist Feminism – Autonomy

الملخّص

تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثيّة موضوعات الأمومة والأخلاق في سياق الرّأسماليّة، من خلال تحليل رواية كيت شوبان "الصّحوة" (The Awakening, 1989/2020)، ورواية توني موريسون "سولا" (Sula, 1973/2004) من منظور نسويّ-ماركسيّ. وتتناول الدّراسة الكيفيّة الّتي تُسهم بها البُنى الرّأسماليّة في استغلال النّساء وتقييدهنّ، ولا سيّما في أدوارهنّ كأمّهات، بما يفرض عليهمنّ مواجهة أشكال عدم المساواة المنهجيّة الّتي تُشكّل هواياتهنّ وخياراتهنّ. واستنادًا إلى أعمال منظّري الماركسيّة والنّسويّة الماركسيّة مثل ماركس، إنجلز، فيديريشي، لوكسمبورغ، ألتوسير، وغرامشي، تحلّل الورقة نقديًّا كيف تُجرّد الرّأسماليّة الأفراد من إنسانيّتهم، وتُكرّس القمع القائم على النّوع والعرق، وتُحوّل الأمومة إلى سلعة. وتُظهر الرّوايتان كيف تُسلب الأمهات استقلاليّتهنّ، وتُشكَّل قراراتهنّ الأخلاقيّة ضمن نظام يمنح الأولويّة للرّبح والسّيطرة على حساب الكرامة الإنسانيّة. ومن خلال تموضع هذه السّرديّات في سياقات تاريخيّة مثل الحرب الأهليّة الأمريكيّة، والثّورة الصّناعيّة، والحرب العالميّة الأولى، تُبرز الدّراسة كيف تُرسّخ الرّأسماليّة، بلامبالاتها تجاه حياة المضطهدين، أوجه عدم المساواة المنهجيّة عبر العرق والجنس. وفي النّهاية، تؤكّد الورقة أنّ أخلاقيّات الرّأسماليّة تكشف عن نفسها بوصفها نظامًا يقوم على إهانة الحياة البشريّة واستغلال الأمّهات في سبيل الثّروة والسّلطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأمومة – الأخلاق – الرأسمالية – النسوية الماركسية – الاستقلالية

Introduction

Family dynamics have been changing ever since the beginning of time when roles aimed at obtaining the family's relatively few basic survival needs of the time. Unlike early matrilineal communities in various indigenous societies, agriculturally advancing societies paved the way for patriarchy to set foot as landownership became central to wealth. Thus, many ancient civilizations (3000 BCE – 500 CE) were hierarchal, commodifying women for wealth, restricting them to two roles, household maintenance and childbearing, both of whose purposes were to serve the process of gaining more wealth. This resulted in marriages as contracts, arranged for wealth, land, or alliances that fulfilled the objectives of wealth or land. In the 18th and 19th centuries, and on a similar but extremely wider scale, the Industrial Revolution further separated work from home, creating a divide between domestic and public roles. With the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the caregiver, the commodification of family roles accentuated as the working class sent their children to factories. A shift in family dynamics took place in the modern era with the rise of civil rights movements, children's rights, single-parenting, and blended families.

However, this shift did not break the firm bond between family and capital, as the demands of the current societal rules require submission to the forces at play. The intersection between patriarchy and capitalism made them inseparable, creating a capitalist-patriarchal feedback loop - an unbreakable dynamic cycle that enforces a societal morality idealizing women's self-sacrifice as wives and mothers. This morality, along with patriarchal ideology, results in conformity and obedience, leading to the disappearance of the self. The above historical background illustrates how the moral expectations of motherhood shape and constrain self-autonomy within a capitalist society. It illustrates how the moral expectations of motherhood shape and constrain self-autonomy within a capitalist society. Motherhood under capitalism refers to a moral and economic institution that relies on women's unpaid domestic labor, emotional caregiving, and reproductive function to sustain the capitalist system, all while promoting ideals of self-sacrifice and moral purity. This paper argues that in both *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973), motherhood functions as a moral and economic mechanism of control, imposed by a capitalist-patriarchal order that demands women's self-sacrifice, suppresses individuality, and reinforces systemic exploitation.

Methodology

The methodology chapter gives the analysis section the ground to discuss *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973) within a Marxist feminist framework, focusing on how capitalist structures influence women's experiences. By exploring the intersections of class, gender, and labor, this section seeks to uncover the ways in which capitalism shapes motherhood and morality in both novels. Through this lens, the analysis, thus, examines how societal expectations around gender and class impact the characters' identities, choices, and struggles. Basing the analysis on Marxist feminist theory allows a deeper understanding of the systemic forces that confine women to prescribed roles, while also considering the ways they resist or conform to these pressures within a capitalist context. Drawing from the works of Marx, Engels, Althusser, Gramsci, Nietzsche, and prominent Marxist feminists, this methodology explores how economic systems shape social relationships, cultural norms, and family structures, particularly regarding women's roles and reproductive labor.

Central to this analysis is Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), which outlines how the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal family systems eroded women's autonomy. As societies moved toward monogamous structures to protect private property inheritance, women were relegated to domestic roles, with their labor essential yet unrecognized within capitalist systems. This transformation profoundly impacted motherhood, reducing it to a tool of economic control by

reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies. Marx's theories provide further insight into the ways economic systems shape social relations, including those of gender. His concept of alienation, detailed in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, illustrates how workers are estranged from their labor and humanity under capitalism. This estrangement can be extended to women, who are confined to reproductive and domestic roles, alienated from their full potential as individuals. In both *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973), the protagonists navigate and resist these imposed roles, reflecting the entrenchment of capitalist exploitation within domestic spaces. In the above-mentioned manuscripts, Marx (2009) says, "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes even cheaper the more commodities he creates" (p. 2). Aligning this concept with the novels under study, workers can be seen as mothers whose commodities are their children and house chores, further devaluing them and contributing to their loss of identity.

The analysis also incorporates Louis Althusser's (2014) theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), which sheds light on how motherhood is culturally idealized and mandated. Through institutions like the family, religion, and education, women's roles are presented as natural rather than socio-economically constructed. This ideological framing is evident in both novels, where motherhood is portrayed as a duty shaped by systemic forces, not personal choices. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony complements Althusser's framework by examining how dominant ideologies perpetuate normative roles. In *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973), cultural norms surrounding motherhood and morality serve to maintain capitalist patriarchy, while the protagonists' resistance exposes the systemic forces that confine women within these roles. Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (2007) offers a lens to deconstruct the moral systems sustaining capitalist interests. His concept of the "will to power" aligns with the defiance of the protagonists, who challenge societal expectations despite systemic constraints.

Transitioning from these foundational theories, this section integrates key contributions from Marxist feminist thinkers. Juliet Mitchell's essay "Women: The Longest Revolution" (1966) historicizes patriarchy's control over women's reproductive roles, while Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* (1986) critiques feminist moralism in literary criticism, advocating for material changes alongside cultural liberation. The works of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* emphasize the political significance of unpaid domestic labor, as Margaret Benston's "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" (1969) analyzes the domestic labor in debate, connecting feminist and working-class struggles.

Further enriching this framework, Rosa Luxemburg (1951) critiques capitalism's exploitation of familial relationships, advocating for revolutionary change in *The Accumulation of Capital*. Luxemburg (1951) believes that capitalism cannot sustain itself solely within its own system, as it requires working in violent coercive means to acquire external resources and exploitation, further incorporating non-capitalist systems (rural economies) into the capitalist framework (communal societies) to fuel this expansion. This justifies the exploitation of women by moralizing their roles as mothers and caregivers. Because granting women the right to work outside their homes did not challenge the unpaid nature of domestic labor, Luxemburg believes that the solution is in dismantling the capitalist system, not merely improving its condition within it. This is clearly manifested in Morrison's Nel and Chopin's Edna, who try to gain their economic independence but ultimately fail due to the societal constraints imposed upon them.

Another Marxist feminist text is Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) which links historical witch hunts to capitalism's efforts to suppress women's resistance. This is further explained in her *Revolution at Point Zero* (2012), explicitly stating that "In the name of 'class struggle' and 'the unified

interest of the corking class,' the Left has always selected certain sectors of the working class as revolutionary subjects and condemned others to a merely supportive role in the struggles these sectors were waging" (p. 28), underscoring the invisibility of reproductive labor under capitalism and highlighting its role in reinforcing women's subjugation. Bluntly speaking, Federici believes that "Housework was transformed into a natural attribute […] We are seen as nagging bitches, not as workers in struggle" (p. 16). To Federici, a capitalist society makes mothers believe they are supposed to perform emotional and domestic labor as a moral obligation, and it is only deemed moral when it aligns with capitalist values of prioritizing children's welfare over personal agency.

Through this Marxist feminist lens, the following section critically examines how *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973) depict the systemic exploitation of women's labor and the moral constructs surrounding motherhood. This analysis emphasizes the necessity of dismantling capitalism to achieve meaningful liberation, situating the novels within broader socio-economic and cultural critiques.

Analysis

The struggle of human nature always seems to be unwavering, unchanging, and Sisyphean. In his endless and futile attempts to reach up the steep hill of Tartarus, Sisyphus demonstrates the inescapability of condemnation, a word defined as "the act of *judicially"* "censuring or blaming" another (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As a matter of fact, it is this eternal denunciation that deems humanity perpetually bound to its own void, striving against insurmountable odds, only to find itself repeating the same pattern of conflict and despair. Sisyphus' belief that his wit outgrows that of Zeus is perceived as an overstep of boundaries, a hubristic attempt to defy the gods, and an insolence of morality and respect. In Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus,* one might interpret a paradox when he says: "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus, 1991, p. 123) because the gigantic boulder Sisyphus carries appears to represent nothing but the irrationality of punishment.

The eternal appeal of Sisyphus' sentence lies in its futility. Those who claim that punishment serves as a teachable opportunity - for both the individual who committed the crime and society at large - overlook a fundamental flaw in this logic when the punishment is eternal. If Sisyphus is condemned to repeat his task forever, he cannot learn or grow, as the essence of learning is demonstrated by encountering similar situations and choosing not to repeat past mistakes. Furthermore, others in Sisyphus' community, and even in later generations and communities, have continued to commit similar crimes, underscoring the failure of punishment as a deterrent.

While the punishment of Sisyphus embodies an ancient, unyielding form of retribution, modern approaches to discipline, particularly in education and parenting, have moved away from such methods, recognizing their inherent limitations for fostering genuine growth. Although they may temporarily halt someone's actions, this change is often driven more by fear of external forces than by any internal understanding or transformation. American criminologist Howard Zehr (2015) discusses the broader aspect of retribution. He contends that "Our paradigms are particular ways of constructing reality, and our retributive understanding of justice is one such construct. The retributive paradigm of justice is one particular way of organizing reality" (p.90). This concurs with Nietzsche's (2007) belief of the polar complexities of the "master-slave morality", arguing that morality can be neither universal nor eternal, but rather a societal construct influenced by power dynamics.

The futility of punishment, then, serves not to rehabilitate or educate but to satisfy the ego of society as a whole and the one meting out the punishment - a hollow exercise in control rather than a meaningful tool for growth. Punishment and condemnation, subcategories of morality, thus reinforce power and control. They make the powerful more powerful and the weak even weaker, echoing Marx's concept of the rich and the poor in a capitalist society. Punishment and condemnation breed on

increasing human nature's desire to believe that such *suitable* consequential responses are merely for the sake of humanity's progress, further present in society. They deceive individuals by making them believe that the best versions of themselves, designed and programmed by society, are waiting for them by the end of their retribution.

Accordingly, much like The Bottom's "post-war fake prosperity" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 81), individuals face empty promises. Since, as noted earlier, punishment thrives on fear, the primary deterrent for individuals from committing an immoral, societal aversion is the fear of getting seized. This leaves them with three alternatives: suppress it instinctively and believe it is true, do it discretely without getting caught, or defy it outwardly and become outcasts. In fact, the embodiment of suppression, discretion, and defiance is manifested by various characters in *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973). This embodiment emerges as a result of tying the Black community of The Bottom and the Creole society in New Orleans, Louisiana with capitalist morality – a value system that promotes women's self-sacrifice, moral obedience, and domestic labor as virtues in service of patriarchal capitalism – shaping the characters' thoughts, feelings, and identities.

Historical Contexts of The Bottom and New Orleans: The Evolution of Capitalist Societies

To analyze The Bottom – Morrison's marginalized yet oppressive Black fictional community relegated up the hills above Medallion, Ohio – and New Orleans – Chopin's affluent yet restrictive Creole community – as capitalist societies under a Marxist feminist lens, it is essential to explore their historical, economic, cultural, and social contexts particularly through the examination of class conflict, hegemony, and the implication of economic structures on marginalized communities. The narratives vividly illustrate how capitalist frameworks perpetuate inequality and reinforce dominant ideologies. Based on Silvia Federici's (2004) work on the relationship between capitalism and reproductive labor, the economic systems of The Bottom and New Orleans could be seen as exacerbating gendered and racial inequalities, positioning women as both victims and agents of survival.

The palpable disparities between the socioeconomic classes of the Bottom and the flat, fertile land of the valley create a well into which the entire Black community continues to plunge, sinking ever deeper. Unlike the Bottom, the valley offers good economic opportunities, granting privilege and prosperity to the Whites in glaring contrast to the struggles of the Blacks. This relentless descent highlights the moral prejudice within these communities, marking certain individuals like Sula and Shadrack, to name two, as doubly marginalized – first by the forces shaping their community and again by those within it. In line with Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), these inequalities are perpetuated not only by economic structures but also by the prevailing ideological systems that teach the oppressed to accept this as fate, both externally and internally. The Bottom becomes a space where capitalist ideologies, through ISAs such as religion, education, and law, reinforce the social order that oppresses the Black community, ensuring that their position remains stagnant while the valley's privilege thrives.

As a result of the American Civil War (1861-1865), the Great Migration pushed many Black families to move North to escape the South's racial violence and economic oppression, but, unfortunately, Black communities kept being segregated and redlined into less habitable and more underdeveloped areas. It was a segregation deeply engrossed in every aspect of life, as even the harsh weather in The Bottom adds to their anguish. After the abolition of slavery, promises like land grants were often manipulated or reneged upon, leaving the Black communities in economically precarious positions. Interestingly, the irony Morrison (2004/1973) creates through the story of how The Bottom came to being serves as enough evidence to their subjugation and agony. Manipulated into believing the land situated up a hill – ironically called The Bottom because this is how God sees it from above – was fertile and a godsend, a former slave was led to trust he had the privilege of choosing it, unaware

that his choice had expired before it even began, as the white man had already made the decision for him. Aware of the geographical conditions in The Bottom, the white man granted the Black community a land whose hills "protected the valley part of town where the white people lived" (p. 73). All they received is heavy winters yet a dry, infertile land. Dirt, death, and decay haunted the Bottom as one "couldn't go anywhere without stepping in their shit," the "robin['s who] were flying and dying all around" (p. 89).

The Industrial Revolution also played a key role in transforming The Bottom into a capitalist society. As Ohio became the hub of industrial growth, Black workers were often given low-wage labor in factories or domestic roles for men and women respectively, contributing to even more economic disparities between the two races. Landowners and employers thus exploited Black labor while offering little economic or social mobility, leaving the residents of The Bottom with nothing but poverty, hunger and diseases, further straining their societal bond through the clash between morality and expectation on one hand and self-autonomy guised in betrayal and survival on another. In this sense, the capitalist society of The Bottom forces women like Nel, Helene, Eva, Hannah, and Sula to take difficult decisions regarding motherhood, some believing survival is achieved by prioritizing tradition over autonomy, while others choosing the pursuit of autonomy at the expense of socially imposed capitalist moralities.

In addition to the repercussions of the Civil War and Industrial Revolution, the dire aftermath of World War I played a crucial role in shaping The Bottom and the lives of the Blacks. They have faced limited access to stable employment or wealth accumulation as a result of scarcity of job opportunities, influencing their moral decisions and survival strategies. Broken promises to Black veterans also made things much worse because as they returned home with hopes of greater social and economic recognition, they were met with renewed racial violence and systemic exclusion, a disillusionment that resonates with Shadrack's character, whose post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symbolizes the personal and communal scars of war. As Gramsci (1971) would argue, Shadrack's PTSD is not just a personal affliction but also a consequence of the structural violence within capitalist systems that produce psychological alienation, further complicating survival strategies in The Bottom. The war highlights the global contradictions between democracy and freedom as those in The Bottom were demoted to menial labor or exploited in industrial jobs. Disempowered, unemployed, and emotionally scarred individuals like Shadrack became alienated, taking refuge in their solitude. His creation of National Suicide Day reflects his and The Bottom's fractured sense of purpose and morality.

Morrison's novel (2004/1973) opens and ends with Shadrack, emphasizing the important role he plays. This is to highlight the fact that the patriarchal-capitalist dynamics victimize both men and women, which places this paper in the sphere of defending mankind rather than restricting it to women's wellbeing. It does not aim to blame men and fathers for mothers' suffering. On the contrary, it intends to shed light on the broader aspects and consequences of the capitalist-patriarchal systems present. By the end of the novel, Shadrack's condition deteriorates significantly as his hallucinations intensify to an extent that he no longer needs to consciously suppress and forget his trauma with alcohol. It has become embedded in his identity, making drinking lose its purpose. Numb, Shadrack does not feel the pain anymore because "Now he could not remember that he had ever forgotten anything" (p. 155). His "military habits of cleanliness" are "relinquished", leaving his shack in disarray. It became more difficult to tame his hallucinations, as "The messier his house got, the lonelier he felt, and it was harder and harder to conjure up sergeants, and orderlies, and invading armies; harder and harder to hear the gunfire and keep the platoon marching in time" (p. 156). Even his calls for Suicide Day are no longer genuine especially after he learns that Sula has died.

The broader community, struggling to recover, thus experiences moral compromises as a means of survival. As members of this community, mothers make survival-driven choices in an unforgiving, merciless capitalist system. The difference here, however, is in each individual's approach to what she believes survival is. Women like Eva must make harsh yet pragmatic decisions to sustain their families under conditions of poverty and instability, challenging traditional ideals of morality and motherhood. Her decision to sacrifice her son, Plum, for the greater good of her family exemplifies the moral dilemmas mothers face. Sparing him a life of addiction and impotence, Eva "lit [a newspaper] and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight" after she "lifted her tongue to the edge to her lip to stop the tears from running into her mouth" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 47). Federici (2004) argues that under capitalism, motherhood becomes a site of moral conflict, as women are forced to navigate between maternal instincts and survival imperatives, as seen in the above example of Eva's decision to sacrifice Plum.

For any human being to commit such an obscene act, it means either one or both are psychologically impaired. After Plum came back home from war, "he began to steal from [his family], take trips to Cincinnati and sleep for days in his room". He barely eats and stays alone. The devastating conversations he has with Eva reflect a regression to infancy, losing his self-sufficiency and becoming utterly reliant on his mother. He curls up on his mother's lap, yearning for a glimpse of peace and calmness, seeking refuge from the external realities of a world that has traumatized and broken him. He says, "You holdin' me, Mamma?" (p. 46), to which she breaks internally. She sees her son's behavior as a rejection of life's struggles – a retreat into dependency – and perceives that killing him is a mother's ultimate sacrifice, sparing him from prolonged suffering and indignity. The severe conditions of Black mothers are further highlighted as Eva explains to Hannah the drastic conditions the Black generally and black mothers specifically had to go through. Her heart-aching words as she tells her daughter why she killed Plum after he came back from war appear as though she is trying to let out steam and give herself some kind of atonement for what she did, "I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again […] I couldn't birth him twice" (p. 71).

It is only normal, then, to say that Eva, the unbreakable matriarch, who has raised her children with no help from their father, BoyBoy, keeping them safe and fed, who sacrificed all she had, including her own leg, for the sake of her children, would never take the decision of burning her son alive in his room for selfish reasons. She is still the same Eva whose motherly instinct helped save Plum's life back when he was a child suffering from intense and fatal bowel movement issues. Thus, her actions serve as a response to the economic and psychological conditions stemming from WWI, and not from lack of empathy toward her child. This is emphasized when Hannah asks Eva if she genuinely loved her and Plum by spending quality time with them as children, to which Eva replies pragmatically. Accusing Hannah of being ungrateful, Eva describes to her what being black meant back in 1895, "1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies" (p. 68). She continues to explain that things like "love" and "playin'" were not really an option for the Blacks. The epistemic effects of violence, terror, and poverty had a massive repercussions on their daily lives that mothers could not enjoy their time with their children:

> No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night, with you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (p. 69)

The way Eva, and other mothers of the time, could express their love was manifested in keeping their children alive first and foremost. They loved their children this way out of survival-related reasons. In 1895, there was an interplay of oppression, racism, and patriarchy, all serving under capitalism. Mothers had choices to make, all of which might sorrowfully do not fall under the moral conduct set by capitalist societies. In this case, Morrison (2004/1973) is inviting readers to reexamine the complexities of morality under capitalism, where love and survival often clash, echoing with various other characters in other works – such as Saeed the Pessoptimist, Emile Habiby's embodiment of how survival in drastic situations knows no socially constructed moral conducts, Arthur Miller's Willy, who is driven by his capitalist society to kill himself so his family could benefit from his life insurance, and Edward Albee's Jerry, whose awakening is manifested in committing suicide as a result of the meaninglessness of his life in a modern, capitalist community.

Not different from Morrison's The Bottom, Chopin's Louisiana roots from colonialism and slavery. Founded by the French and later controlled by the Spanish and Americans, New Orleans thrived as a port city built on enslaved labor. The wealth generated by plantations and trade flowed into the city, creating a massive divide between the wealthy elite and the impoverished masses. Similar to the false hopes of a better future in The Bottom, New Orleans' shift from a slavery-based economy to one reliant on wage labor instilled false expectations in its residents, while gender and racial hierarchies remained deeply entrenched. By the end of the 19th century, New Orleans embodied a Gilded Age dynamics, with wealthy families like the Pontelliers enjoying the harvest of industrial and agricultural capitalism while others toilet in poverty.

A prosperous businessman who owns property and has a comfortable lifestyle, Mr. Pontellier becomes an archetypal figure of capitalism. His eagerness to leave the house, let alone the city, for work in Carondelet Street at the very beginning of the novel highlights the peace that comes with economic independence. Being a bourgeois man in a patriarchal-capitalist society thus gives Mr. Pontellier a margin of freedom that Edna longs to have, intensifying the inevitable conflict between them. In addition, the way Edna's society views Mr. Pontellier explores how deeply engrossed it is in its capitalist sphere, for "All [the ladies] declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world" after he sends Edna "a box […] filled with [refined] *friandises* (Chopin, 2020/1899, p. 12).

Furthermore, the Pontelliers' luxurious home on Esplanade Street with its "rich and tasteful draperies" and its "heavy damask" contribute to painting the perfect image of Mr. Pontellier, a generous husband who pampers his wife with as many expensive gifts as the eyes could reach, instigating "envy of many women whose husbands were less generous" (p. 76). Assigning Mr. Pontellier the title of the "best husband" based solely on his wealth is a prime example of a capitalist society that glorifies the material and underestimates the emotional. The Pontelliers' wealth and ability to vacation at Grand Isle illustrate the leisure class's reliance on the exploitation of labor, from domestic servants to industrial workers. The rigid class system mirrors capitalist ideals, where social mobility is limited, and wealth dictates power. Edna's financial dependency on her husband underscores the Marxist feminist critique of how capitalism reinforces gender oppression, something Edna succeeds to defy in her quest to self-discovery. Her struggle specifically aligns with Federici's concept of how women are undervalued through their domestic sphere in a capitalist system.

In this essence, capitalism serves as a shaping force, underpinning societal structures, morality, and survival strategies. Economic pressures dictate the choices of women, particularly mothers, forcing them to navigate roles within a system that commodifies their labor and sacrifices. In *The Awakening* (2020/1899), Edna's dissatisfaction with motherhood stems from her role as a bourgeois wife - a role defined by patriarchal capitalism, which views her as a caretaker and status symbol rather than an individual. This is evident when Edna tells Madame Ratignolle, "I would give up the

unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin, 2020/1899, p. 54). This moment marks a crucial rejection of the idealized "mother-woman," signaling Edna's desire for autonomy in a society that conflates moral virtue with maternal sacrifice. Edna's defiance also resonates with Nietzsche's critique of *slave morality*—a moral framework that elevates submission, self-denial, and obedience as virtues. Nietzsche argues that these values are designed to suppress the individual and maintain societal control. In rejecting the role of the self-sacrificing mother, Edna challenges this morality, seeking to reclaim autonomy in a world that demands her erasure.

In *Sula* (2004/1973), motherhood, as embodied by Eva, is shaped by survival in a system that leaves Black women economically vulnerable. Eva's decision to kill her son Plum, whom she believes is wasting away in addiction and dependency, reflects a brutal but necessary pragmatism. She tells Hanna "He was a man, girl, a big old growed-up man. I didn't have that much room […] so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 72). Eva's actions confront the moral codes of slave morality as Nietzsche would describe them: rather than embracing self-sacrifice and passive virtue, she asserts control over her life and family, rejecting moral ideals that require her to remain passive and subjugated. In doing so, Eva challenges the very foundations of capitalist and patriarchal morality that force women into impossible, self-denying roles.

Both novels highlight how capitalism enforces traditional gender roles and moral codes while exploiting women's labor. Whether through Edna's quiet rebellion or Eva's ruthless pragmatism, the novels expose the dehumanizing pressures placed on women by a capitalist-patriarchal order. By applying a Marxist feminist lens, the texts reveal how these intersecting systems of class, gender, race, and morality constrain women's agency, using Nietzsche's critique of *slave morality* to understand the personal and collective rebellion against a society that demands obedience, sacrifice, and control.

Identity Markers: Suppression, Discretion, and Defiance

Morrison (2004/1973) depicts repression and evasiveness through the conformist Nel, who craves societal approval over personal autonomy, the self-sacrificing matriarch Eva, who wears her mask to hide her vulnerabilities and maternal pain, and the guarded Hannah, whose reluctance to deeply connect with men on the emotional level might stem from her complex emotions about motherhood. Even the entire Black community in The Bottom appears to have forgotten all about their frustration, grief, and anger over systematic racism, poverty, and inequality at the expense of gossiping and judging others. This behavioral suppression resonates with Marx and Engels' assertion that capitalism serves to alienate individuals from their true selves, making them subjects that internalize dominant ideologies (Marx & Engels, 1848). By conforming to society's expectations, these characters embody the alienated subjects that Marx critiques, whose identities are not self-determined but rather shaped by the external pressures of capitalist society.

The masking of pain and emotion within these women also speaks to Silvia Federici's (2004) argument that capitalism suppresses women's resistance by tying their labor to the reproductive role, an aspect evident in Eva's sacrifices and the community's conformity to oppressive social structures. In contrast, Eva and Hannah are also symbols of defiance – the former through sacrifice and the latter through sexual freedom. Federici's critique of women's unpaid domestic labor is further reflected in Hannah's autonomy, a rejection of the repressive patriarchal expectations. Emerging as the third-generation, unapologetically rebellious Sula exemplifies the potential for revolutionary change as envisioned by Marx, who believes that "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all". This vision underscores the necessity of dismantling capitalist structures to enable true individual liberation.

The world that Chopin (2020/1899) creates is not unlike Morrison's (2004/1973) in her "depiction of alienation and social constraint" (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 27). In her depiction of this late-19th-century Louisiana, Chopin (2020/1899) illustrates the lives of a Creole community as they confront their own struggles of suppression, discretion, and defiance. Mrs. Ratignolle and Mr. Pontellier's interactions with those around them reflect their adherence to societal expectations, with Mrs. Ratignolle embodying the ideal of domesticity, and Mr. Pontellier navigating the tensions of marital authority. An epitome of society's ideals, Mrs. Ratignolle suppresses and loses her sense of self, as she fully immerses into the role that is expected of her as the perfect wife and mother. This corresponds with Federici's assertion regarding capitalism's efforts to suppress women's resistance to patriarchal control, further enforcing reproductive labor (Federici, 2004). In Mr. Pontellier's case, discretion conceals his hypocrisy, a clear manifestation of delusion that distances him from any true sense of autonomy. He, through his false sense of authority, reflects Engels' critique of the bourgeois family, where men assert their dominance over women, which prevents any true autonomy for either party (Engels, 1884). Although they outwardly maintain the appearance of the ideal images of a significant other, their roles within their marriage are shaped by unspoken understandings, highlighting the tension between societal norms and morality on one hand and autonomy on the other.

With Mrs. Ratignolle and Mr. Pontellier representing suppression and discretion, respectively, Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna's defiant natures emerge to complete the picture Chopin (2020/1899) paints of the Creole community, thus establishing a correspondence between *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973). The role Reisz plays in the novel is pivotal to the progression of events. Her relationship with Edna mirrors a similar kind of relationship in another Creole community in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Though neither Reisz nor Christophine should be blamed for the outcomes, the conversational advice that Reisz offers Edna has an equally tragic impact to the potion Christophine gives Antoinette, both serving as catalysts for the protagonists' freedoms yet eventual demise.

Edna's journey toward her tragic end aligns with the archetype of a tragic hero. As individuals in her community question her every move as a woman and a mother, she comes to embody the epitome of motherhood's failures. Beseeched, Edna resorts to her defiance as a reaction to more societal constraints. In the capitalist society Edna belongs to, mothers are supposed to perform emotional and domestic labor as a moral obligation, something Federici (2012) emphasizes in her *Revolution at Point Zero*. Edna seems to take on Federici's stance against capitalist values which deem motherhood only moral when it aligns with values like giving priority to children's welfare over personal agency. Both agree that morality does not address the practical struggle of economic independence for the "combination of physical, emotional, and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital […] creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible" (Federici, 2012, p. 17).

In these two parallel realms, Morrison (2004/1973) and Chopin (2020/1899) illuminate the intersection of gender, autonomy, and identity, as their characters confront or shun personal desires. Throughout both novels, they navigate the predicament of whether or not to conform to moral codes under the scrutiny of societal surveillance and capitalism.

The Erasure of Women's Identities: Responses of Mothers to Capitalist Societal Expectations

As established earlier, The Bottom and New Orleans are controlled by capitalist systems, which interfere in the very details of everyday life. The dilemmas that specifically mothers face in both communities stem from their inability to go beyond the external socioeconomic forces at play. They navigate their lives by either defying or abiding by their societies' expectations. Their roles are often under scrutiny, and their every move is almost always under moral surveillance according to ethic codes

molded and imposed by the powerful capitalist system. Consequently, there is always something to be lost: if they carry on with their lives as passers-by, slowly vanishing into their assigned roles, they lose their sense of their very selves, and if they ever think to defy these strict roles assigned to them, they lose their dignity and reputation, incurring humiliation and devastation to their images as wives and mothers.

Morrison's women – Helene, Nel, Eva, Hannah, Sula and even Teapot's mom – as well as Chopin's – Mme. Ratignolle, Mme. Lebrun, Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna, and the other women at the summer resort – all have their own struggles with moral decisions under capitalism; some yield while others resist. To begin with Helene, her role as a mother is shaped by societal expectations under capitalism and patriarchy. Her conformity to traditional roles, and the way she shapes Nel into a similarly constrained mold, illustrates the sacrifices and moral compromises she makes to uphold respectability. Her morally upright position prioritizes respectability and discipline, raising Nel to be a copy of herself and the exact opposite of Sula. Helene's efforts to diminish Nel's artistic side by suppressing her individuality and desires contrast sharply with Sula who, "like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 121). Sula thus typifies the image sketched by Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening* (2020/1899), who rightly tells Edna that "to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul" (Chopin, 2020/1899, p. 97), further connecting both novels.

Moreover, when Helene plans to embark on the trip South to see her dying grandmother, Cecile Sabat, who had sent her away from an astray mother, she thinks that "her manner and her bearing" would be enough to get her through the ordeal of encountering the discriminatory white southerners, yet she later realizes that segregation engrossed in capitalism is too blatant for her refinement to acclimate to her politeness (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 19). It is noteworthy to mention that Helene's relationship with her grandmother is not a typical one. First, Helene abhors her Creole heritage and abstains from speaking or teaching her daughter, Nel, French, attempting to disavow herself from everything related to her mother. This could be understood in relation to how capitalist and racial hierarchies force women to distance themselves from aspects of their own identity to achieve respectability. This is reflected in the lack of "recognition in the eyes of either" upon Helene and Cecile's encounter (p. 25). In brief, Helene becomes a mere product of society, "whose eagerness to please" others debilitates all her energy, defining her existence in the process (p. 20), which perfectly applies to what Federici (2004) says about capitalism. She firmly argues that capitalist systems necessitate the suppression and restructuring of women's identities to align with patriarchal and economic hierarchies, reflecting the pressures of operating within a capitalist and racially stratified society, where cultural identity becomes a liability rather than a source of empowerment.

Another conformist Morrison (2004/1973) introduces is Nel. As Federici and Luxemburg argue, women's roles as caregivers and moral arbiters within the family are deeply entwined with capitalist structures that exploit their unpaid labor and limit their autonomy, a condition that both Helene and Nel endure within their respective communities. As a mother, she reflects the pressure to comply to the values and structures imposed by both the capitalist system and the racially segregated society in which she finds herself living. She apodictically adheres to her assigned roles, embracing the traditional, self-sacrificial image of motherhood, which is prevalent in her community. Her mother had instilled in her the importance of decency and traditional morality, and, in turn, Nel follows these ideals while raising her own children. Even though Nel admires Sula's freedom from when they were little, Morrison (2004/1973) explicitly states that "… the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasm that little Nel would showed was calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 18). She thus believes that being a good mother means being a caretaker, sacrificing her personal desires for the well-being of her children, and maintaining a

respectable public image. This submission to the expectations of motherhood within a capitalist society limits her potential for self-expression or personal fulfillment outside her maternal role.

Like many women in a capitalist system, Nel derives her identity and moral worth from her role as a mother, seeing her responsibility as central to the survival and success of her family. Her marriage to Jude and blind commitment to the traditional roles within her home reflect her unquestionable conformity to the system, where women's value is often tied to their ability to bear children and maintain the family structure. Within the context of The Bottom, Nel's role as a conformist mother is also informed by the racial and economic realities of being a Black woman in a segregated, economically oppressed community. Her obedience to societal norms can be seen as a way to survive the capitalist system, which offers few opportunities for women, especially Black women, to step outside of traditional roles, yet her moral duties as a mom are directly linked to her mental health. Despite the sarcastic tone in her words, Nel demonstrates the calamitous impacts of obedience as she tells Sula "I ain't strangled nobody yet so I guess I'm all right" (p. 96).

Nel's submission to her assigned role is manifested in her marriage to Jude, symbolizing her full embrace of the conventional role of wife and mother within the capitalist and patriarchal structures of The Bottom. In a capitalist society, Nel's marriage, much like Edna's, is not a personal choice but an embodiment of an institution that upholds social order, stabilizes family structures, and provides economic and emotional security. Such marriages stem from the urge to settle down as a result of society's insistence. Her decision to marry Jude is partly driven by the pressure to conform to societal norms that equate womanhood with domesticity and motherhood. The transactional nature of relationships within capitalist society is supposed to guarantee stability to both Nel and Jude, yet the plot unfolds with the former being completely "wore out" – said in response to Sula to imply that it is *she* who is consumed, not her husband, as Sula implies – and the latter cheating. Their household is not quite accustomed to joy, something that becomes discernible when her and Sula's laughter "frighten the cat and made the children run in from the back yard, puzzled at first by the wild free sounds, then delighted to see their mother stumbling merrily", which highlights the positive influence of having a healthy and happy mother on the children's mental health (p. 97).

Nel's condition deteriorates after busting her husband cheating on her with her best friend. At first, Nel would not believe her eyes. She is in deep denial that even when she sees them together, she still tells herself that "there was some explanation […] that would have made it all right" (p. 105), but after realizing that there is *no* explanation, Nel retreats into the bathroom, seeking a physical and emotional refuge from the chaos outside. The bathroom, often seen as a private space, becomes her sanctuary - a place where she can process the searing pain and disillusionment. In this bathroom, she understands that "Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change." She wants to scream, not for help, but for her own pain, uttering words that resonate with any individual, "Why me?" (p. 108). Her devastation is mirrored through the following words:

> … are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days all the way, O my god, to that box with four handles with never nobody settling down between my legs even if I sew up those old pillow cases and rinse down the porch and feed my children and beat the rugs and haul the coal up out of the bin even then nobody, O Jesus, I could be a mule or plow the furrows with my hands if need be or hold these rickety walls up with my back if need be if I knew that somewhere in this world in the pocket of some night I could open my legs to some cowboy lean hips but you are trying to tell me no and O my sweet Jesus what kind of cross is that? (p. 111)

After Jude leaves for good, Nel is left all alone. Chapter "1940" of the novel describes her drastic condition. She barely makes ends meet, jumping from one job to another. Her "hot brown eyes had

turned to agate, and her skin had taken on the sheen of maple struck" (p. 139). It is striking that even when society is supposed to see that it is equally Jude and Sula's fault, it is Sula who is blamed, keeping Jude free of charge. Yet the issue of morality that Sula raises is pretty striking. She flagrantly demands that because she and Nel are "such good friends", Nel should "get over it". After all, Sula "didn't kill him, [she] just fucked him" (p.145). Sula completely rejects all moral values that seem like common sense to others, only not to herself. Even though she is the one who slept with Nel's husband, she clings to blurring the lines between morality and her self-autonomy. Her refusal to conform could be seen as a rejection of capitalist morality. Within this framework, Edna's pursuit of desire outside marriage and motherhood destabilizes her assigned role. Her later decisions, such as her affair with Nel's husband and eventual withdrawal from familial obligations, may be interpreted as either liberating acts of resistance or moral compromises shaped by the very norms she resists, thus exposing the entrenchment of the capitalist-patriarchal feedback loop. She bluntly questions Nel's attitude toward who is good and who is bad. She might as well be the "good" person in this situation (p. 146), and it is in this uncertainty that *Sula* (2004/1973) resonates with Federici's argument that morality is a but a social construct. Jude, Nel's husband, then simply disappears. Privilege women do not even dream of, leaving Nel with in charge of everything, which means that in addition to her assigned role as a woman and mother, she now has to take on her husband's role as well. Briefly, "the full responsibility of the household was Nel's" (p. 138). A single mom of three at fifty-five, Nel is left with nothing. Her husband has left, her children have grown, and her life has passed, emphasizing the broader existential crisis that most mothers face after the burdens of raising their little children have passed. Unaware of who she is without them, she ends up having nothing to look forward to. In fact, Nel, left to face her demise as a mother in a capitalist society, bears both striking similarities to and notable differences from Chopin's Edna, whose identity shifts as the author transitions from referring to her as Mrs. Pontellier at the start of the novel to simply Edna as she asserts her autonomy.

Both Edna and Nel represent the toll the capitalist-patriarchal society takes on mothers despite the characters' antithetical approaches. Even though they take opposite trajectories, they still end up in the same time zone. Edna's escape from the traditional maternal role is directly tied to her economic independence, while Nel's adherence to the maternal ideal, even as it leads to personal ruin, speaks to the lack of agency for women in economically deprived environments. Whereas Nel succumbs to mores and follows all that is expected from her as a mother, Edna aims to unchain herself from the moral restraints of her capitalist society by going through her rebirth. Instead of trying to find herself, Edna first lets go of what is keeping her from taking the first step toward her inner self, allowing herself to see things differently, as though for the very first time. The way she observes her arm manifests her readiness to discover her true identity. She is so enthralled by this new Edna, a woman conscious of her life, feelings, desires, needs, and even her body that even flowers felt "like new acquaintances" (Chopin, 2020/1899, p. 111). Having long worn the layers sewn by society, Edna sheds one after the other in an attempt to understand who her naked self is without all the covers. While Edna's desire to break free from traditional motherhood echoes Costa and James' analysis of women's rebellion against capitalist exploitation of their labor, Nel's adherence to societal expectations reflects the harsh reality Federici and Luxemburg describe, where women, even when they wish to resist, are bound by economic necessity and the societal expectation to maintain family structures at their own expense.

From being "forced to admit that she knew of [a] none better" husband (p. 12) to "beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being" (p. 21), especially by moving out of her family home to a new house alone "without even waiting for an answer from [him]" (p. 130), Edna defies the societal expectations that reduce her to a compliant mother as she undergoes a rebirth that "transform[s] her from the listless woman […] into a being who […] seemed palpitant with the forces of life" (p.

106). Chopin (2020/1899) herself plainly describes her as "not a mother-woman" because, as society claims, good mothers "idolized their children, worshipped their husbands" (p. 13). Edna's rejection of the societal norms tied to motherhood and her refusal to conform to traditional roles of the 'mother-woman' reflect the analysis by Marxist feminists like Silvia Federici, who argues that capitalism co-opts women's roles as caregivers and nurturers, reducing them to mere instruments of reproduction and service. By resisting these expectations, Edna asserts her autonomy, reclaiming selfhood beyond the restrictive bounds of capitalist motherhood.

Unlike the charming, "feminine and matronly" Mme. Ratignolle who – in her seven *dreamy* years of marriage – has had three children insofar, Edna is perceived as a bad mother. She is not interested in making winter garments for her children because she knows they are warm and cozy enough just the way they are. She knows their needs are met, so she knows she does not have to get into detailed nonsense to appear as the most flamboyant mother. To use today's diction, this garment is a child's lunchbox, the more meticulously prepared, the better the mom appears. She begins to hold a sense of awareness of her thoughts and feelings as she is realizing that she is willing to give up her money and her life to her children, but not her sense of self. This realization is shockingly true because the moment Edna feels that she has exhausted all her efforts not to sacrifice herself, she disappears into water. Thus, even though society views Edna as a bad mother who has left her children to live in a house of her own, she loves them deeply and expresses this adoration by spending real quality time reading stories and playing with them. As a matter of fact, she is able to express this motherly love only after she forcibly grants herself the margin of freedom she deserves as a mother, unlike Eva, who could not show her children the kindness they deserved. Eva's maternal failure further influenced her mental stability as it was shaped by the burdens and prejudice imposed by her society. This instability was highlighted in her decision to sacrifice her leg and the treatment of her children, and to endure the authoritarian behavior, isolation and trauma, and the conflict with Sula.

In contrast to Nel and Shadrack, whose grief feeds on their loneliness, and Mr. Pontellier, who is rather afraid of being alone with his thoughts, Edna finds solace in solitude. In many parts of the novel, Chopin (2020/1899) emphasizes Edna's longing for being alone where she is able to breathe "a big, genuine sigh of relief" (p.110). For example, Edna refuses to get inside the house at Mr. Pontellier's request, insisting on having time to herself. Analyzing her own actions, Edna realizes that every time she did what her husband told her to do, she did it subconsciously and "not with any sense of submission" (p. 47), emphasizing her long-present sense of duality "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (p. 22). It was out of habit, or rather nurture, instilled by society, that she acted the way she did – unaware of how unfair it is to her. Her increasing desire for solitude and her eventual rejection of the roles imposed upon her underscore the work of theorists such as Silvia Federici, who critiques the way capitalism forces women to internalize the burden of motherhood and self-sacrifice. Federici, along with Rosa Luxemburg, highlights how the private sphere of the home becomes a site of exploitation, where women are confined to unpaid labor that supports the capitalist economy, a point reflected in Edna's struggle for self-definition.

Edna's one-of-a-kind husband does not wish his wife were not obedient because he considers she "was the sole object of his existence" (p. 9). This firmly reiterates the patriarchal-capitalist notion that "If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" Mr. Pontellier, an embodiment of his society, believes he "could not be in two places at a once – making a living for his family on the street and staying at home to see that no harm befell them," to which Edna gives the silent treatment, firmly defying the norm (p. 10), further highlighting Federici's argument that the problem lies in unpaid domestic labor, which was not solved as women gained the right to work outside their homes.

Just as Edna's "noble beauty of [her] modelling and [her] graceful severity of poise and movement" made her firmly stand out "from the crowd" (p. 23), Sula's "evil birthmark" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 115) becomes a distinctive stain that sets her apart from others, symbolizing her rejection of societal norms. Edna's rebellion leads to a form of self-destruction, while Sula's defiance is more outwardly confrontational but still reveals a sense of emotional fragmentation. Sula, as perceived by society, becomes a "witch" (p. 150), a figure whose defiance of social norms and rejection of traditional roles mirrors the way women were historically demonized and marginalized during the rise of capitalism, as Silvia Federici (2009) discusses in her *Caliban and the Witch*. Sula, just like Edna, has had enough alone time to know what she desires and what she rejects. Not surprisingly, motherhood to Sula represents a societal expectation she rejects, choosing instead to prioritize her individuality and freedom over conforming to traditional maternal roles.

Had capitalism been less socially harsh and restrictive on women regarding motherhood as it is with fatherhood, Sula might have considered it, but the identity shaped by these restrictions is entirely the opposite of who she truly is. Federici's work in *Caliban and the Witch* provides a lens through which we can understand how capitalist structures demonize women who refuse to adhere to traditional gender roles, positioning them as outsiders or witches. Sula's defiance, not unlike Edna's, is an assertion of individuality, refusing to be defined by the capitalist-imposed roles of mother and wife. It is not surprising that Sula, the offspring of Hannah –Eva's daughter – ends up with such an attitude, yet a striking difference between Sula and her grandmother reveals itself when Eva – struggling to convince Sula to have children – accuses Sula of being "Selfish" as a response to the latter's forthright words, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison, 2004/1973, p. 92). In this sentence, Sula's autonomy is contrasted with motherhood. She firmly believes that children are barriers stopping women from achieving their sense of self. A disgusting mentality like such, along with her sexuality and rumors of her sleeping with white men, "made old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her" (p. 112-113). Furthermore, after Nel tries to convince Sula to have children so that the latter would not feel "lonely", Sula insults Nel by introducing her to what the former calls a "secondhanded lonely", a loneliness "made by somebody else and handed to you", unlike that of Sula, which is, as she sees it, "*mine*" (p. 143).

If one gradually attempts to uncover the root issue of Sula's aversion toward children, it is important to comment on three of the novel's most influential incidents. First, Sula is raised without a father figure, much like her mother, whose father embodies everything Sula, Hannah, and Eva detest. She is not willing to "spend [her] life keeping a man" because men "ain't worth more than [her]" (p. 143). Second, Sula overhears Hannah saying "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (p. 57), shattering Sula's inner child. And the third is the fact that Hannah's blunt words might stem from the care and kindness without which she had to grow. Black children of the 19th century had no childhood. Many grew believing their mothers had no empathy to spare, no time to give, and no love to share. As patriarchy gave more space for capitalism to expand, poverty made it impossible for families to grow softer. A threefold blend of "her own imagination", "Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence", Sula embodies a generational trauma that manifests as a deep-seated repulsion toward children (p. 118).

It is worth noting that Morrison's Sula, much like Chopin's Edna, ironically enough finds peace only in her death. Unlike others shaped entirely by societal norms, Sula carves her own path where she "was completely alone – where she had always wanted to be – free of the possibility of distraction" (p. 148). In her death, she finds the solace she had long longed for. Unlike 'others' in her society, her soul finds peace only when "her body did not need oxygen" anymore (p. 149). Only when she dies can she

break free from all expectations, scrutiny, and encroachment. Barrett's (1986) work on the capitalist system's role in shaping women's lives serves as a foundational theoretical framework for discussing how societal structures define women's roles, particularly in terms of motherhood. In this sense, Morrison (2004/1973) critiques communities and religions' idleness and bigotry. The author's description of how The Bottom receive the news of the witch's death is not haphazard. After having worn the shield of morality to defend against Sula's perceived disgrace, the community no longer feels the need to uphold these hypocrisies guised in moral standards in her death, as they "had nothing to rub up against" (p. 153). They revert to old habits: Teapot's mother, who had once accused Sula of hurting him, abandons her moral facade and resumes beating him. Daughters, after previously showing extra care for their mothers-in-law in response to Sula's actions, return to their old burdens (p. 153-154). Even wives have no need to baby their husbands anymore.

By juxtaposing the community's belief that "a brighter day was dawning" (p. 151) with its multifarious plagues, Morrison (2004/1973) mirrors how capitalism distorts communal values, fostering a culture of scapegoating and deflection. The Bottom's economic hardships, shaped by systemic inequities, leave its residents clinging to superstition and moral judgment as coping mechanisms. Instead of uniting to challenge the structures oppressing them, they channel their frustrations into vilifying Sula, whose nonconformity becomes a convenient target. In this way, capitalism not only exacerbates material deprivation but also erodes collective solidarity, redirecting societal resentment inward rather than toward the true sources of their suffering. Society's tendency to define itself in opposition to others is a clear example of its hypocritical and judgmental character. Their "determination not to let anything – anything at all […] keep them from their God" (p. 150) while ignoring and justifying their own flaws calls attention to their collective, intolerant, and stereotypical bias which contributes to the capitalist attempt to eradicate any attempt to autonomy.

Conclusion

In examining the intersections of motherhood and morality under capitalism, this paper reveals the unpalatable truth of the harsh realities of exploitation inherent in the capitalist system, as seen through the experiences of mothers and women in *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973). The capitalist class, indifferent to the lives lost in wars or other enterprises, exploits both Whites and Blacks, prioritizing profit over human dignity. The aftermath of WWII, where only the capitalists emerged unscathed and richer, underscores the greed-driven nature of this system. To this day, capitalists remain unconcerned with the lives sacrificed in pursuit of wealth, romanticizing the role of mothers while revealing a profound lack of morality in a system built on the exploitation of others. Through the lens of Marxist feminism, it is clear that both Chopin (2020/1899) and Morrison (2004/1973) expose the ways in which capitalism dehumanizes and controls, particularly when it comes to the roles and struggles of women within this oppressive structure.

The feminist insights of theorists like Silvia Federici and Rosa Luxemburg further illuminate how capitalism not only exploits women's labor but also enforces a moral framework that supports capitalist relations by devaluing women's autonomy. Federici's critique of the capitalist family and its role in women's subjugation highlights how motherhood is commodified and used to sustain capitalist and patriarchal structures. Similarly, Luxemburg's analysis of capitalism's need for the exploitation of all labor, including women's reproductive labor, underscores the way capitalism depends on women's economic and emotional labor to maintain its oppressive power. Both Chopin (2020/1899) and Morrison (2004/1973) reveal, through Edna's rejection of bourgeois constraints and Eva's ruthless pragmatism, how the capitalist-patriarchal system creates a moral framework that punishes self-assertion and reinforces submission. Ultimately, *The Awakening* (2020/1899) and *Sula* (2004/1973)

invite readers to question the morality of a system that places profit and power above human life, dignity, and autonomy. By focusing on women's rejection of these roles, both Morrison (2004/1973) and Chopin (2020/1899) critique the capitalist system's oppressive structures and the moral contradictions embedded within them, offering a compelling critique that continues to resonate with feminist struggles today.

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