

## Roots Still Here: The Language of Internalized Misogyny and its Role in Generational Trauma in Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*

Sarah Jackson

Department of English  
The University of North Carolina Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor(s):  
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

### Abstract:

Within the fictional town of Opulence, Crystal Wilkinson paints a beautifully grim picture of the lives of Appalachian women of color. Centered around the Goode-Brown family, in which three generations of women live under one roof, Wilkinson's tale is one of both despair and hope as these women navigate their lives while contending with the harmful effects of internalized misogyny that pervade Opulence. Behind closed doors, the cycles of sexual violence and abuse reign unchecked, even within the Goode-Brown household as old wounds between mother and daughter begin to reopen. Family matriarch Minnie Mae holds fast to the family values instilled in her long ago as her great-granddaughter comes of age, while her daughter and grandchild struggle with the scars of postpartum depression and trauma from past abuse. In her review of the *Birds of Opulence*, Journey McAndrews states, "Although these women love fiercely, they clip one another's wings and peck away at one another's faults," signifying that although the Goode-Brown women have the best of intentions, the harmful beliefs perpetuated by misogyny can erode even the strongest of family bonds, leading to consequences such as mental illness and generational trauma.

In this literary analysis, I explore how Wilkinson expertly weaves a tale of complex relationships between women and the detrimental effects internalized misogyny can have, and how it may intersect with trauma and mental illness. As Wilkinson demonstrates, there is power in naming and discussing the struggles that continue to plague Appalachian women, many of which stem from detrimental beliefs that have been perpetuated for generations. The Goode-Brown women are a representation of how such deeply entrenched beliefs can unravel a family, while also providing hope that said beliefs can also be unlearned.

Though Crystal Wilkinson's fictional town of Opulence may at first glance seem like a picturesque Kentucky town, a closer look reveals an unspoken darkness that plagues its residents, centered around the women of the Goode-Brown family. Behind closed doors, misogyny pervades Opulence – whether through deliberate sexual violence or internalized misogyny unwittingly passed on from woman to woman. The secrets kept by the Goode-Brown family and those around them fester in the dark, eventually spilling over to reveal how these long held, harmful beliefs have affected their minds. Wilkinson highlights these beliefs through careful description of the women of Opulence's interactions with each other, under which lies a constant undercurrent of sexualization that precipitates consequences such as generational trauma and mental illness. However, though the residents of Opulence are steeped in sexist ideas, Wilkinson offers evidence of their impermanence through the youngest of the Goode-Browns, Yolanda, who begins to notice and resist the sexism in the ideals of her elders.

The narrative opens with the birth of Yolanda, great-granddaughter of Minnie Mae, the family matriarch. Yolanda's mother, Lucy, gives birth to her in a squash patch in the family garden. Though this moment should be a celebration of new life, it is overshadowed by the internal struggles clouding the minds of each of the women in the family. Even as they drive back to the house after the baby is born, each of the family members are "enveloped in our own separate haunt. Yet we were one, sharing past and future" (Wilkinson 14). This line immediately highlights the interconnectedness of the struggles each of the Goode women endure. Though these struggles may manifest differently, they are all derived from the same source of generational trauma.

Wilkinson initially takes a detailed dive into the workings of Lucy's mind, who experiences what is commonly assumed to be postpartum depression, though this diagnosis is never given or named. Lucy is the introduction to the Goode family mindset, as Journey McAndrews points out in her review of *The Birds of Opulence*, "The storm is much more than just postpartum depression; what Lucy experiences is the thunderclap of mental illness that gives way to a tempest of sadness that exists within all the women in her family" (117). Through bouts of dissociation and despair in the days following the birth of Yolanda, Wilkinson also offers hints of a deeper conflict that contributes to not only Lucy's illness, but the mindsets of the women in her family. In her bed after giving birth, Lucy listens to the noises her family members make as they move about the house. "She registers the ruckus of the evening again – the end of supper, voices, chairs being scooted out. Behind that door are clothes to wash, a white sudsy sink full of dishes, children to feed, a husband to love, a mother to please, a grandmother to praise (Wilkinson 20). Though she is in recovery, Lucy's mind is occupied with not only which household duties await her once she is able, but also the mother and grandmother that she must appease.

These expectations and the weight they carry for Lucy appear again once she receives visitors from the Opulence community to celebrate the birth of her daughter. Though the festivities run smoothly enough in the beginning, the celebration grinds to a halt once Lucy's internal struggle is put on display. As Yolanda begins to cry, it triggers a strong reaction from Lucy, who begins sobbing so uncontrollably that she loses her grip on Yolanda, who rolls to the floor. While Lucy's behavior is a cause for concern in and of itself, it's the reaction the other women have that highlights the harmful, misogynistic

believes the community of Opulence is entrenched in. They immediately recoil, gossiping about how crazy Lucy is even before filing out of the Goode household. As referenced by Samuel Roy in his thesis *The Descent of Old Haunts*, "The residents of Opulence minimize Lucy's struggle by calling her a 'crazy heifer,' unaware that this is a major depressive episode and not just aberrant behavior. The indirect characterization of Lucy's illness, as well as her community's reaction to her withdrawal reflects the reality many Appalachians see in their own communities" (11). In addition, this reaction highlights the women's beliefs of how the role of a woman in their community is meant to be played. As Lucy fails to meet their expectations of motherhood, she is met with ridicule and ostracization, as she doesn't uphold the ideals that are expected of women in Opulence. The blame is placed entirely on Lucy, while her husband, Joe Brown, is pitied for having married a woman who cannot properly fill her role as a mother and wife. "And poor Joe Brown. She's lucky as sin to have him. Wonder if he don't pack up and leave. On this night, and for a long time to come, every tongue stirs" (Wilkinson 33).

This moment showcases that the damaging effects of patriarchy and misogyny affect not only women as a group, but also pit women in that system against each other. As Journey McAndrews states, "Although these women love fiercely, they clip one another's wings and peck away at one another's faults" (117). These effects are displayed at their most extreme with the character of Minnie Mae Goode, the family matriarch. Through her, readers see many detrimental, internalized beliefs of a patriarchal society. As she watches her great-grandchild grow up, she is fixated on the changes in the body that come with maturity, particularly when Yolanda's hips begin to fill out. "She wonders if a girl child will ever understand what she is getting herself into when her hips start to show" (Wilkinson 86). Minnie Mae is preoccupied with what will begin to happen once Yolanda's body develops, or rather, the attention she will garner from men because of the change in her body. Minnie Mae even tells her daughter, Tookie, to keep an eye on Yolanda, "'Tookie,' she had warned, 'That girl's hips are out. You better watch her'" (Wilkinson 85). Though she loves her great-granddaughter and wishes to protect her, Minnie Mae places the fault of this change on Yolanda, and assumes that she can't be trusted to keep her legs closed. The women of Opulence continue to be governed by their sexuality, no matter their age.

This idea is once again echoed in Wilkinson's careful depiction of the relationships between the women of Opulence. She describes nature's bounty in a distinctly feminine way, "Wild blackberries gleam fat and succulent on vines along fencerows, waiting to be plucked by girl hands," and "Breasts like tiny plums that just barely raise the fabric of blouses" (75). which is a constant reminder of a woman's role in the community – a sexual object, ripe for consumption. This is meant to mirror the ways in which the women of Opulence present themselves in an attempt to capture the male gaze, which is evident in the annual Dinner on the Grounds. "So here they are, the seeker women, lined up like blossoms in a flowerbed, in their lilac and white, daffodil yellow and sherbet orange" (Wilkinson 104). This duality of nature and femininity appear as the women dress themselves to potentially attract a male partner. This is also a time where women judge one another harshly. Another example once again involves Minnie Mae, who comments on another woman's alleged promiscuity. As she watches a neighbor who wears a more revealing dress, Minnie Mae states, "Look at the hussy on

the lord's ground"(Wilkinson 105). Though stating what she believes is improper, Minnie Mae also buys into the harmful cultural values she has been fed since her upbringing. As Lucy Lansing summarizes in her essay, "Freedom Through Mental Health in Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*," "Patriarchy is the system of Opulence. Though Wilkinson's novel focuses on women, the cultural values of the community in which the female characters live are centered on a male-dominated interpretation of the world" (86). Though never explicitly stated, Wilkinson still makes the women of Opulence's oppression one of the most prevalent, suffocating themes in the novel.

As the head mother figure for the Goode family, Minnie Mae has existed within the patriarchal system of Opulence longer than any of her children, and has already internalized the misogyny that surrounds her. She comments on Yolanda's friend Mona's choice of dress in front of the whole Goode-Brown household, "Does your mama know you left the house in that skirt up to your hind end?" (Wilkinson 123) She has begun policing the behavior of the other women in her family, in an attempt to not appear as promiscuous as those around her believe women to be, even though most of the abuse and sexualization is perpetrated by men. As stated by Nathan Full who discusses the myth of the "bad black woman" in his article, "The Power to Overcome: The Resistance and Resiliency of Black Motherhood," "Minnie Mae internalizes this myth, forcing herself to compartmentalize her sexuality and instead focus on maternity, trying to prove to both herself and others that she, too, is not what the white hegemony believes black women to be, something Minnie Mae had to combat as a young teenager trying to protect her virginity" (60). In order to mitigate the effects of misogyny, Minnie Mae focuses on controlling the behavior of the women in her family so they are less likely to attract unwanted attention from men. In Opulence, virginity is one of the few pieces of leverage that a woman has, which is one of the reasons why Minnie Mae reacts so violently when she finds out her daughter Tookie is pregnant at age thirteen.

Throughout the novel, Wilkinson gives readers glances into the mind of Tookie, who seems to constantly battle memories from her childhood – specifically, the year she was beaten by her mother and gave birth to Lucy. "And there it is again: 1943 knock, knock, knocking on Tookie's head. The day Lucy was born. The beating she got. Who else would a child turn to but her mama?" (25) The memories of her mother beating her until her father had to pull her away plague Tookie her whole life, never asking why her mother did what she did until one night as they both sit on the couch together, unaware that Yolanda listens from the stairs. Even then, Minnie Mae offers little sympathy. "You should have kept your legs closed. Period. Maybe it didn't do you no good. Seems like you still ain't got a lick of sense" (133). Her mother's discounting of her suffering only makes Tookie's pain worsen, the rift between them widening. In his thesis, Samuel Roy writes, "Tookie's lifelong pain is trivialized by Minnie Mae because she conflated discipline with care when Tookie needed it most. That is not to say that Wilkinson wrote Minnie Mae's actions as an endorsement for abuse within the black household; rather, she wrote it as a warning that continuing the cycle of abuse as care can have dangerous consequences if ideas aren't changed" (18). By focusing on her role as a mother to prepare her child for a future in Opulence, she sees Tookie's pregnancy as a failure on her part, and reacts by disciplining her further.

While Minnie Mae believes she did the right thing in disciplining her daughter, she also can't offer a clear explanation when Tookie asks her why, stating, "I expected

more from you, I guess, Tookie. I don't rightly know" (Wilkinson 132). It's very arguable that Minnie Mae isn't aware of the internalized misogyny that her community has steeped her in, fueling the cycle of abuse and mental illness in the Goode family. Once again, Full offers insight into Minnie Mae's motivations, "The notion that Tookie is raped, especially considering her young age, is not discussed by Minnie Mae, meaning that she both explicitly and implicitly lays blame on Tookie, not the aggressor. That Minnie Mae does not consider rape as a possibility and instead assumes that Tookie is promiscuous speaks to her shared history with the patriarchy she grew up in, meaning that the shared beliefs of black women's hypersexuality, heavily perpetuated during her own upbringing, still influences her" (Full 59). The shared beliefs of the Goode family also reflect the shared beliefs of Opulence, which is governed by patriarchal ideals. Though Minnie Mae wields most of the authority in her family as she passed down these beliefs, she also is largely unaware of the pain she has caused, making her an unknowing victim of the system of Opulence.

The detrimental effects of these beliefs are easily seen in not only Tookie's pain, but also her daughter, Lucy. In a sense, the novel both begins and ends with Lucy, starting with her daughter Yolanda's birth and ending in the aftermath of her suicide. After both Tookie and Minnie Mae pass away and her children move out, Lucy is alone with her husband Joe, and once again begins to feel the dark clouds of past trauma pressing in around her. Parts of her body begin to feel like squash vines, and she begins to confuse her mother's memories with her own. "Did I ever tell you about that time Mama beat me?" she begins. [...] 'Yes,' Joe says, though he knows it's her mother's, Tookie's story that has buoyed up to the surface of her mind" (Wilkinson 186). Though she hasn't personally experienced the trauma her mother endured before she was born, this behavior is meant to exhibit just how intertwined the experiences of the women of the Goode family are, as they are all part of the same system of hypersexualization and patriarchy that has worn them down and turned them against each other. There is also never any help offered to Lucy before her suicide, which could have been prevented if the topic of mental illness were not so misunderstood. In Lansing's article, she states, "Specifically, in manifesting the daily trials of Appalachian women whose lives are tainted by mental illness, Wilkinson's characters serve as experiments in confrontation with some of the factors, such as patriarchy, that inhibit efforts to curb the negative effects of mental illness" (86). Lucy's pain is pushed aside as the women around her focus more on the role she is failing to fulfill more than her actual health. While patriarchy is not the only factor in the mental illness that plagues the Goode women, it is just as invasive as the squash vines that haunt Lucy – an inescapable reality that the women of Opulence must contend with.

However, Wilkinson doesn't leave readers without hope. The last remaining Goode-Brown woman, Yolanda, begins to exhibit an agency not yet seen in the women who came before her. Though the patriarchal ideals she grew up around have not changed, Yolanda demonstrates a refusal to buy into the shared beliefs passed down from her great grandmother. Wilkinson mentions many times throughout the novel that Yolanda is an active observer of the women around her, such as when she listens to the breakthrough conversation Minnie Mae and Tookie have from the stairs. She also observes when out in town with her friend Mona, where "they notice every single thing that happens in Opulence, and they soak up the way grown people carry on. They

watch couples hold hands and loop arms, even if they were fighting the week before” (108). This close observation shows that the relationships in her hometown are very much in the forefront of Yolanda’s mind. Though she doesn’t outright protest against her great-grandmother, Yolanda displays a quiet resistance when Minnie Mae makes remarks about Mona’s outfit during her birthday celebration at the Goode household. “Yolanda cuts her eyes at Minnie Mae, but does it shyly so she doesn’t get accused of sassing back. Some things can’t be excused away by old age” (Wilkinson 125). Though she recognizes that Minnie Mae is a product of the ideals she grew up around, Yolanda doesn’t buy into her great grandmother’s way of thinking – in fact, she sees them as outdated and unnecessary. Perhaps, beginning with Yolanda, the strangling vines that plagued the Goode women may be finally beginning to unravel.

In another instance, readers encounter Yolanda’s struggles with mental illness through the eyes of her father, Joe, in the last chapter of the novel. “And then Yolanda with those spells, those *panic attacks* as she calls them” (194). Though Joe displays some hesitancy as to the origins of Yolanda’s “spells,” this is the first time throughout the novel that any sort of mental illness is named, indicating that Yolanda has been proactive about educating herself in mental health. As Nathan Full puts it, “Through Joe’s language used to describe her symptoms, panic attacks, it is indicative that Yolanda has learned from the past and wishes to destigmatize the illness and live with a diagnosis. Yolanda exhibits an agency not afforded to her mother” (66). In this acquired agency, Yolanda takes a step in the direction of healing and mitigating the effects of generational trauma that have warped the minds of the previous generations of women in her family. The smallest acts of independence become a protest against the all-consuming misogyny that is inherent in the patriarchal system of Opulence.

Though Yolanda’s quiet triumph may ring hollow against the picture Wilkinson has painted of Opulence, a commentary on the detrimental beliefs of Southern towns in Appalachia, there is power in naming and discussing the trials of the Goode women. In her careful depiction of generational trauma, mental illness, and complex relationships riddled with internalized misogyny, Wilkinson draws much needed attention to the conditions Southern women are subjected to when their roles are strictly defined by their sexuality. Resentment builds and hopelessness reigns, resulting in dissolved family ties and abuse. The name of the town, Opulence, then becomes a bit satirical. On the surface, it may seem like a luxurious place, but a closer look reveals just how much pain exists beneath.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

Full, Nathan, "The Power to Overcome: The Resistance and Resiliency of Black Motherhood" (2017). *Theses, Dissertations and Capstones*. 1136.  
<https://mds.marshall.edu/etd/1136>

This thesis tackles the subject of black motherhood and its depictions in Octavia E. Butler's *Patternmaster* and *Wild Seed*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*. For Wilkinson's novel, Full covers African American women and shared history, specifically attempting to refute a racist and sexist depiction of black matriarchies discussed in the 1965 "Moynihan Report," also known as *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which contends that black matriarchies are a "devastation" to black families that "emasculate" men. Full, inspired by Patricia Hill Collins' "Black Feminist Thought," (1990) contends that the black matriarchy depicted in Wilkinson's novel is instead a means of survival, as the newer generations of women in the Goode family eventually learn through one another's shared history, and begin making their own decisions that will lead them towards better lives. Full is a graduate of Marshall University and a West Virginia native.

Lansing, Lucy. "Freedom Through Mental Health in Crystal Wilkinson's" *The Birds of Opulence*" *Furman Humanities Review* 29.1 (2018): 87-100.

This article takes a more psychological approach and specifically examines mental illness in *The Birds of Opulence*, citing the importance of mental health care for women of Appalachia, whose cultural values produce many roadblocks on the way to recovery. She offers that there is hope in stories such as Wilkinson's, which give voice to the complexities of what women struggling with mental illness in Appalachia endure, and can help identify factors, such as patriarchy, that prevent women from getting the care they need. To do this, Lansing cites both *The Birds of Opulence* and a multitude of relevant research on mental illness in Appalachia. She talks back to Mary Murfree's depiction of the helpless mountain woman, and cites other Appalachian journal articles that work to disprove this depiction. Lansing's work is published by the *Furman Humanities Review*, which annually publishes undergraduate works. She also presented her research at the 41st annual Appalachian Studies Association Conference in 2018.

Roy, Samuel. *The Descent of Old Haunts: Mental Illness in The Birds of Opulence*. Diss. The University of North Carolina at Asheville, 2017.

Samuel Roy, a former UNCA student, also wrote a senior thesis on Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* through the lens of mental illness. Roy brings in the context of race and the specific effects of mental illness on Southern African American women, citing trends in African literary canon such as generational trauma. He describes the importance of keeping intersectionality in mind when discussing how mental illness affects black Appalachian women, and how Wilkinson's novel is an important addition to that conversation. Roy tackles the damaging stereotypes that surround Appalachia and its people by citing early Appalachian literature and local color writers, who promoted Appalachia's population as all white and dim-witted. Roy also argues that intersectionality has a compounding effect once gender and race are added to the mix, and emphasizes the importance of remembering that though *Opulence* is fictional, Wilkinson's experience as a black woman in Appalachia isn't.

Wilkinson, Crystal. *The Birds of Opulence*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2018.