

Toni Morrison's portrayal of the Plight of Black women in Afro-American society through her Female Protagonists in *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison (originally, Chloe Anthony Wofford) one of the most celebrated contemporary American writers is famous for her keen interest in the examination of Black experience, particularly the plight of Black women. She clearly portrays the tormented and dehumanised conditions of the black whose actions are defined primarily by the white world. She successfully communicates to the reader how the black woman were not treated as human beings but rather as things who are denied every political, social and human right. Through the fictions of Toni Morrison we get to understand how a Black women's physical bondage turns into a psychological one, and ultimately how her inner world is completely shattered. Thoroughly aware of the pathetic condition of black women, Morrison exhibits their triple oppression of being a women, black and an African-American.

Morrison displays in her novels the legacies of displacement and slavery that had been consigned to the Afro-American community. Exposing aspiration, hope, joy, sorrow and desire of the black people, she reveals their consciousness of exploitation and suppression. She skilfully employs myth and fantasy along with realistic portrayal of racial gender and class conflict to further comprehend the struggle.

Key Words: Feminine Vulnerability, Torture, Discrimination, Identity, Displacement

Introduction:

Toni Morrison a woman of brooding perseverance, imbibed practical traits from her familial background. She grew up in a family that had a lot of admiration, love and respect for the Black culture and its traditional story telling, songs and folktales were a formative part of her childhood. Her ability to transform individuals into forces and idiosyncrasies into inevitabilities has made reading public identify her as a concerned black woman. Morrison

strongly held the belief that selfhood is to be found in community and in communal experiences. It is impossible to find it in the transcendence of society or in search of private self.

The subjects she writes about include good and evil, love and hate, beauty and ugliness, friendship, and death. Her novels present murder, incest, child abuse, insanity and terrifying family secrets. Morrison's novels can be categorised as quest narratives in which prime characters search for the hidden sign capable of giving them strength or identity. In a significant twist, those who find what they seek become the most thoroughly victimised, while those who leave their search for some other goals are most often triumphant. The protagonists in Morrison's novels, are victim of their colour and race they move toward greater tragedy searching for identity and existence. Struggles for self-hood, occurs as a result of the demands placed upon them by both the black and white society. She manifests Afro-American cultural heritage as the link between one's ancestors and oneself. Morrison also devotes herself to the depiction of the black woman in her unique cultural position.

When one endeavours to understand racism in America, one comes across the indispensability of the sexuality of American racism. In the African-American literary history, the return to the past is an all-pervading organic approach which is equipped with crucial but quite ambivalent meanings. African Americans experienced quite a unique condition that conflated geographical trauma with profane nostalgia. To investigate how the repressed individuals and populace experience and undergo through otherness, this research is an effort to amplify the critical discussion of Morrison's works by probing the possibilities and difficulties involved in recovery, employing the literary theory of African womanism and post colonialism in addition to psychological and cultural dynamics. This approach dissects various strands of anguish such as racial, social and psychological ones caused by differentiation in a literary analysis of Morrison's works.

Race and Gender in Morrison's The Bluest Eyes:

Toni Morrison through her novels gives us glimpses of the superstition, the humour, the expression, the values and beliefs of black community. The values that she applauds, admires and pointed helpful, are invariably presented as a background for the major threats in the society that have caused blacks to distance themselves from and to be removed from the values and tradition of their own ethnic culture. Which are alien or distant standards of beauty,

materialism, success and slavery itself. These Penetrating analysis of these issues, Morrison offers, have been the most exasperating part of her fiction.

W E B. DuBois, in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, measures the unfortunate impact of racism on cultural self-consciousness and identity. The term, 'double-consciousness', refers to two distinct realities — a psychological conflict between opposing cultural world views and weak resolution in which externally derived and distorted perceptions of the self constitute a single, but alienated self-consciousness. This observation highlights the socio-political implications behind Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Inspired by the evolving black consciousness of the sixties, Morrison chooses a basic theme and subject for her first major work, the obsession of blacks with an American standard of beauty that seems both inescapable and catastrophic.

In her first novel Toni Morrison carefully invests the problem of initiating self worth in a society where one is sufferer of both classicism and racism. Sketched out by a nine year old Claudia McTeer the novel attributes to the lives of three young girls and their families and the way in which they struggle and sometimes lose their battle of self affirmation against the world that sets forth Anglo Saxon standards of physical beauty and a middle class life style as the norm. From school primers to dolls, to movie, the girls and their families are swamped with representations that turned down the beauty and reality of their lives. The novel presents a simplistic subject matter and accounts the tragic set apart lives of poor black family of Pauline, Cholly, Sam and Pecola. Pecola, unloved and tagged ugly prays each night for blue eyes like those of the privileged blond white school fellows. She becomes the focus of intermingled love and hatred led by her family's feebleness and world's savagery as the novel moves towards ravaging but evoking resolution. John Leonard comments on the blurb of the novel *The Bluest Eye*. The view has been taken from his criticism published in *New York Times*:

The Bluest Eye is an enquiry in to the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in this case is black, the wasting is done by cultural engine that seems to have designed to murder possibilities.

It is a simple story of a complicated black girl who yearns for blue eyes which for her is a symbol or rather standard beauty and therefore of goodness and contentedness.

Each night without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged she was not without hope to have something as wonderful as would take a long time. (35)

Morrison manages to impress us within her very first novel that blue eyes, blond hair, bright skin are the symbol of beauty valued in the west as proclaimed by romantic novels, movies, billboards dolls and reaction of the people to golden objects. But do we really understand the core of that myth it personifies? This simple theme, the deranged hunt of a black girl for blue eyes, is a real and symbolic statement about the dissension between the good and beautiful of the two cultures. This quest is at the bottom of conflict between Anglo-American and Afro-American cultures. Morrison herself states:

The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of western world. (89)
How Pecola comes to desire blue eyes requires more than just narration of Pecola's story. Pecola's want is more of a result of her personal story. It encircles three hundred years of futile conversation between the black and white cultures. It examines how the ideologies authorised by the dominant group impacts, the making of the self image of a black women. Elizabeth observes:

Morrison's stunning insight reveals the disrupted emotions produced by living in a world where white standard and goals are presented to blacks as uniquely important and at the same time impossible for them to achieve. (383)

The parents of Pecola Breedlove abhor themselves because they believe in their own unworthiness which is passed as ugliness to the innocent girl of that family. Pecola's mother Pauline, who works as a domestic servant in a beautiful house, detests the ugliness of her house, her daughter, her family. Pecola like other black girls has been lessoned that blond hair blue eyes and creamy skin are not only beautiful but are the surface illustration of the best of characters God and nature ever moulded.

Pecola never gets to realise that she has been under spell of white culture. All that she gets to experience is the continual spurning and violence what's more chilling is the inability of Pecola's parents to love their daughter which is why they failed to give their child a sense of value. For them the black world is representative of the evil, night, separation, loneliness, sin, dirt where as the white world epitomises innocence, purity, cleanliness, spirituality, virtue and hope. Morrison says:

When the strength depends on its beauty when the focus is turned to know one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble... (90)

Probing into the ruining consequences of the western ideas of beauty and romantic love have on a vulnerable black girl, the novelist establishes how these concepts invert the natural order of an entire culture. The premise of the novel is that racism shatters the self-image of the African female, in general, and African female child, in particular. At the nucleus of the novel is that the society's need to outcast the need of its members to have someone to look down upon and, therefore, enhance once constantly threatened sense of worth. The novel expresses the vulnerability of poor black girls and how easily they can become outcasts in a white society.

Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* deconstructs the myth around Beauty constructed by the white Americans. Pecola's obsession with physical beauty leads to disastrous consequences.

Search for Identity in *Sula*:

In *Sula*, Morrison's pivot shifts to the black woman as an individual, striving towards liberation and selfhood. *Sula* is elementally a woman's novel in the sense that it concerns itself with the feeling of women and the different characters they assume, by choice or force. *Sula* involves the eponymous character search for a genuine self but paradoxically signals the contortion of herself made by her immediate family and emphasised by the black community in Bottom. *Sula* is a continuum of self-discovery that Pecola ventured and failed miserably. While Pecola's search forces her into an eternal madness, *Sula*'s ends in death through denial. At the tender age of twelve when the novel opens, crucial in Morrison's discourse for forging selfhood, deprived of role models, *Sula* attempts at her own definition of a self and enquires it further in her adolescence and adulthood.

Sula is set in the time period after the Civil War in the United States and the resultant period of reconstruction. This was the time when the black people were truly being freed. The book opens in 1919, when Afro-American soldiers came back home from Europe after World War I and did not receive as much recognition and respect for their service as white soldiers. After returning, many began to work for civil rights, explaining that if they were considered good enough to fight and risk their lives for their country, they should be given full partaking in society.

Sula the protagonist of the novel is a kind of black American woman who wants to be somebody worthy in this world. She does not wish to simply be a black woman. Additionally, she does not accept the traditional inferior life of black American women and she dreams to become equal with the whites. Sula is an example of the part of the black American community of the twenties who believed that to be a black person is a disability. Sula is insurgent, daring, determined, and rational in her outlook. Despite the fact that she tried to become a part of an enormous society and has sought after opportunities to partake in the affairs of American life, she is compelled to return to her own world.

Sula, is from the black community, Bottom. Very well aware of the role that the black community in the Bottom had Sula knew that the blacks were considered inferior. Sula in her young days, realised that she will be more content if she has an opportunity to live a rewarding life according to her own choice. She finds her power not within her community, but in her fight against it. Once while talking to her grandmother Eva she insisted, "I want to make myself". Sula wanted to endure the system of separation, which had been brought into effect in the Bottom. Sula's opinions on this issue are clear from the very beginning. Sula aspires to go away and try something different from the way she has lived until then in the town. Though Sula is eager when she learns that her closest friend Nel is getting married but she did not want to stay in the place of her birth. She did not want to marry and raise a family. As a result, Sula leaves the Bottom for a period of ten years and wandered around the country. Sula imposes a difficult task upon herself. She tries to be both an African and an American and she attempts to move from one world into another. But she fails to find a phenomenal place to quench her actual desires. Eventually, she comes back to the Bottom. It seems as if she figured out that she was not accepted by the white world and as a result returns to her hometown. However, she comes back as a changed person: "When she returns to her roots, it is as a rebel, a mocker, a wanton sexual seductress". If Sula is read through the eyes of black feminism, it could be understood very well that Morrison wanted to expel the negative portrayal of black American womanhood in various ways. The novel breaks the popular stereotypes of black women in western literature and also builds one of the very few black women heroines who consciously take on the role of an outcast.

Conclusion:

Experiences of the Black women are central to Morrison's novels. How Black female characters have been an easy target to massive humiliation both in reality and their portrayal in fictions in a white racist society where they are treated as mere outcasts who have no privilege for themselves. They have been disempowered in every possible

way. The black women by nature of their race are conceived as a lower class. They could not achieve the standard of womanhood on the one hand and on the other, they were biologically females with all societal restrictions. Morrison elucidates female self as one in process that is not restricted and imprisoned by rigid social and cultural boundaries but constantly becoming. Morrison also critiques the way language has been used to justify savagery and barbarity against black women. She attempts to tear down different stereotypes and frames various black female characters who decline traditional and self-hating ways of being. Similarly she rewrites and explores the hidden stories of pain and degradation. She creates strong black female characters who dismiss the governing racist standards of being.

Morrison's writing is directed to raise consciousness, teach and empower the black community by revealing the reality of their life, and their responsibility to join the collective struggle to diminish inequality and injustice. Indirectly she offers the means that can help them and empower them in the society that has never seen them as human, the means that are available in African American culture and that they have managed to preserve on the face of slavery and slave owners' attempt to erase them.

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