

Toni Morrison's Analysis Of The Importance Of The Afro-American Presence In American Literature

Tripti Sonowal,
M.A in English.

Abstract- The name of Toni Morrison belongs to the genre of African American Literature. She is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature. She can be regarded as a voice of marginalized. Her famous novels include The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, and Beloved. Toni Morrison delivered a lecture at the University of Michigan on October 7, 1988 and this got later published as an essay entitled "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature". This paper is an attempt to go through this essay for the purpose of understanding of Toni Morrison's analysis of the importance of the Afro-American presence in American Literature.

Keywords- Cannon, Fodder, Race, Afro-American Literature.

Introduction- The essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" is divided into three parts. It is concerned with a series of questions as to what should or does constitute a literary canon in order to suggest ways of addressing the Afro-American presence in American Literature. The importance and impact of the Afro-American presence in American Literature are also highlighted. The initial title Toni Morrison gave her essay was 'Canon Fodder' as it deals with the contemporary canon debate. 'Fodder' here implies, 'people considered as readily available and of little value' reflecting the black soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War, and the play between 'cannon' and 'canon' signifies 'officially recognized set of texts'.

Toni Morrison's analysis of the importance of the Afro-American presence in American Literature-

In the essay, Toni Morrison asserts "There is something called American literature that according to conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian-American, or Native American,...It is somehow separate from them and they from it...." She describes "race" as the unspeakable thing, "in spite of its implicit and explicit acknowledgement, 'race' is still a virtually unspeakable thing,...." "Race" seems to exist and not exist according to the convenience of the people who invented the hierarchy of race. On one hand, the black Americans were told that "race" was the determining factor in human development and on the other hand, when they discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, they were suddenly told "there is no such thing as 'race', biological or cultural,..." However, Toni Morrison emphasizes that Afro-American culture exist and though it is clear how it has responded to western culture, the instances where and means by which it has shaped Western culture are 'poorly recognized or understood'.

Toni Morrison goes on to list out the arguments that have effectively silenced the anatomy of the third-world literature or the Afro-American literature since the seventeenth century: firstly, there is no Afro-American art; secondly, it exists but is inferior; thirdly, it exists and is superior when it measures up to the universal criteria of Western art; fourthly, it is not so much art as one that needs refining by Western intelligences.

Nevertheless, Toni Morrison puts forward three methods or strategies which will possibly lead to the acceptance of the Afro-American literature in the American literary canon. Firstly, the development of a theory of literature that accommodates Afro-American literature based on its culture, history, and artistic strategies. Secondly, the examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure and the meaning of so much American literature. Thirdly, the examination of contemporary or non-canonical literature regardless of its category as mainstream or minority; the impact the Afro-American has had on the structure of the work, the language and the fictional enterprise in which it is engaged.

Toni Morrison views that invisible things are necessarily "not there", and that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum. She is of the view that the re-examination of the founding literature of the United States for the unspeakable things unspoken may reveal those texts to have deeper and other meanings, other power and other significances. One example given by Toni Morrison is Herman Melville's Moby Dick. The novel seems to show Melville's recognition of the presence of Whiteness as ideology in America. If the White whale is the ideology of race then what Ahab has lost to it is "personal dismemberment and family and society and his own place as a human in the world."

Towards the end of the essay, Toni Morrison discusses and analyses her own works suggesting the importance of language, how she activates it and how it activates her in turn. It is her choice of language that brings cultural distinction and makes her unique as a black writer. As the Afro-American artistic presence is no longer denied in literature, Toni Morrison states that the African American writers are the subjects of their own narratives and that reading literature written by and about Africans gives the chance to compare this literature with that of the “race less” one.

Conclusion- This way, in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”, Toni Morrison asserts the importance of the Afro-American presence in American literature. She asserts the presence of Afro-American literature, and the awareness of its culture as resuscitating or reviving the study of literature in the United States and raising the study’s standards. Moreover, to Toni Morrison, the study of Afro-American literature is also helpful in understanding the field of sociology.

References-

Morrison, Toni, 1997, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. And Nellie Y. McKay, W. W. Norton & Company, New York.

Chattaraj, Arpita, 2020, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Toni Morrison’s Legacy of ‘Rootedness’, ‘Rememory’ and ‘Playing’ with Differences”, *Postcolonial Intervention*, Vol. V, Issue 1.

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/08/unspeakable-things-unspoken-the-afro-american-presence-in-american-literature> .

[http://www.google.com/search?ei=KBQPX_L6HZiY4-](http://www.google.com/search?ei=KBQPX_L6HZiY4-EPkO6hqAM&q=toni+morrison%27s+unspeakable+things+unspoken%3A+the+afro+american+presence+in+american+literature+summary)

[EPkO6hqAM&q=toni+morrison%27s+unspeakable+things+unspoken%3A+the+afro+american+presence+in+american+literature+summary](http://www.google.com/search?ei=KBQPX_L6HZiY4-EPkO6hqAM&q=toni+morrison%27s+unspeakable+things+unspoken%3A+the+afro+american+presence+in+american+literature+summary) .

