

Toni Morrison : The Black Feminist Writer.

Dr. SYED MUJAHID, Faculty of English, V.S.U.P.G. Centre, Kavali, Andrapradesh.

Abstract

The twenty-first century is likely to witness the richest vein of women literature that contributed much to the African-American literature. Women writers have made remarkable strides in the field of literature and generously expressed their frustrations, struggles, sufferings, and also their successful experiences in their writings. Of these, the Black women have reshaped and redefined the African-American literature because they suffered from the 'twin burden' of being Black and female. Being black they suffered from racism; being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks. Most of the Black writers have been successful in presenting their protagonists as womanists who succeed in creating a new social order based on love and respect for all living things. As a writer inspired by such a noble vision, Toni Morrison, one of the foremost contemporary African-American women novelists, tries to project the black experience, particularly the black female experience, and celebrates the black community.

Key words : African-American Literature, Feminism, Black Consciousness, Racism, Classicism, Sexism.

Introduction

Literature seems to be an essential expression of a civilized man. With the invention of the script, it has been written the record of his spirit, thoughts, emotions, and aspirations. It has aimed at recording the history of human soul, even though it could not always achieve that adjective. For any literary piece to deserve the adjective, it should be rich in universal interest and yet have a personal touch. The objectives of literary creation keep changing with person, age, and fashion, yet often it endeavours to preserve the ideals upon which the frail human civilization is founded; the task becomes tricky, as it has also to sustain the interest of the reading public. In its simpler form, literature attempts to record what man has seen in life, what he has experienced, thought and felt about the various aspects of life. It is this very inquiry that has made the African-American literature flourish in the recent past.

African-American literature is “the body of writing or performed art produced by African slaves and their descendents in America.” (Dinah Birch. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 42). The genre traces its origins to the works of such late 18th century writers as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass, with slave narratives where the authors describe the gradual achievement of freedom against extraordinary odds, including draconian laws against slave literacy in some states, and the Harlem Renaissance. It also tended to incorporate within itself oral forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues and rap.

The development of African-American literature began more than 200 years ago. The first published African-American poet was Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), a slave whose book of poems entitled *Poems on Various Subjects* appeared in 1773, three years before American Independence. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before the Civil War, slave narratives also emerged as a popular form of protest literature. Though white abolitionists often penned slave narratives for political purposes, many former slaves, including Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, among thousands of others, also wrote slave narratives about their personal experiences.

African-American writers primarily concentrated on the slave narratives and the African American texts establish themselves as a medium of propaganda. These narratives were made under the guidance and approval of white abolitionists. Right from its inception, the African-American texts developed a literary institution that generated the values of the dominant culture. Even before the slave narratives, criticism of the African-American texts exerted a prescriptive influence as seen in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). In the words of Bajaj Nirmal one perceives two distinct features in African-American literature : “One is its ‘racist attitude’ and the second the Forms of things unknown that is the ‘spontaneous expressive writings deriving from black folk forms.” (*Perspectives of Afro-American Fiction: Perspectives on the Afro-American Novel*, 7).

The predicament of African-American women is a universal factor right from the birth of woman irrespective of any race. She has been deprived of her essential right to continue as a human being because she has been brought in the 17th century to America as a slave to champion capitalism. As a susceptible black woman, she has endured as she has impelled to arrange herself

for the slave market which has been the bereavement of her racial honour and destroyed of her humanity ending in the restraint of her own alternativeness of herself. A surface of black woman's life that equips shrewdness into her internal actuality is widely stressed by her sexual life. The particular method followed by white man to enslave black woman is 'rape' and that later implanted horror in nature because she feels alone being apart from her culture of the aboriginal land. There is a regular degeneration of sexual assail of the black woman by the white man which is in the after effects of the Civil War.

Today, for African and African-American writers, the literature particularly the 'novel' has been an important vehicle of expression. The novelists, from William Wells Brown to Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor, have explored the lives of African people concentrating on social evils, economic disparity, racism and injustice. In the hands of these writers African-American novel has attained the stature of a distinctive genre because it 'illuminated both the limitations and possibilities of human conditions,' from the perspectives of the blacks. It continues to build on and redefine the foundation of literature in the United States, with the contribution made by such prominent women novelists as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor, securing a popular and diverse audience and inspiring a large output of critical scholarship.

The novels of these women writers primarily deal with the exploitation of the black women. Most of these writers were deprived of the basic principles of liberty, equality, and justice, enshrined in the American constitution. The white American culture too forced these women to search for their dignity and identity. All these women novelists realize that without continuity of place, the consciousness of the emerging artist is threatened. They had to write about their place. They had to define their roles as individuals, family members, especially as woman, wife and mother, and as the nurtures of their own culture by incorporated Black folktales, myths, and so on. The African-American novel therefore is more a quest for identity of black community in general and black women in particular.

In recent times, the African-American literature that began within the black community has now reached a large, diverse, international audience and contributed to the revitalization and expansion of American culture. The themes and subjects have expanded widely, more than ever it is nearly impossible to group the work of African-American authors under a single heading.

Thus, the African-American literature became a vital and enduring part of American literature today.

“Racial discrimination” and pronounced “gender prejudice” are the causes for the predicament of black women. The total rejection tortured the psyche of an African-American. The African-American race was victimized and forbidden from all the paths of life. Superiority of the white skin developed racism as blackness is associated with evil. With the migration of blacks as workers in plantation, the roots of racism in America are deeply implanted. This forceful levying of white values generated void in the psyche of blacks and in due course of time it totally ruined the self-love of blacks who started craving for imbibing the standards set by whites. In this process they have lost their real identity, and have wavered in the acquired identity. Consequently the black men suspected their own women who have been struggling in their work place and at home.

Of all the African-American women writers, Toni Morrison is perhaps considered the best writer for depicting the predicament of black women in her novels. She was an essayist, novelist, book editor, children’s writer and college professor. She expressed her views on the predicament of black women. She was born on February 18, 1931 at Lorain, Ohio. Her parents named her ‘Chloe Anthony Wofford’. She acquired her nick name, ‘Toni’, while attending Howard University. “Morrison” came later, when she married a Jamaican Architect, Harold Morrison, in 1958. She is the first African-American woman novelist to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She describes herself as a ‘black woman novelist,’ and all her novels deal with African-American characters and communities.

The novelist, with her works, motivates the black women to discover through self-realization who they are by understanding and learning their history and what their fate is and how they are progressing to revive and rehabilitate it. She personally feels that African-Americans particularly have to rely on oral tradition and folklore to protect their conviction because opportunity to be educated has been prohibited during slavery. She has also seized a historical strategy to rebuild African-American culture and history in slavery. She positions women at the core of her novels. Intending at undermining a racial regime and evaluating the significance of African-American culture, Toni Morrison disputes a doubly viewed western civilization which has aimed and devalued African-Americans physically and psychologically.

All the novels artistically document the author's awareness of and concern for the historical conditions of oppression of African people in America, thereby revealing her heightened consciousness of the interrelationship of 'race', 'class' and 'gender'. Although all the three elements are present in all her novels, the emphasis on them varies from novel to novel. The novelist examines the problems of 'race' and 'gender oppression' before exploring class contradictions within the 'race'. At the beginning of her writing career, she thinks that "racism" is the main source of oppression of blacks in white America because of her low level of gender and class consciousness. Then, becoming aware of the indispensability of the sexuality of American racism, she finds that "sexism" is equally oppressive. Finally, she realizes that 'racism' and 'sexism' are by products of "capitalism" – the economic systems of slavery.

The novelist uses each novel as a frame work for investigating various problems of and solution to the African's dilemmas. In each of her novels she explores some aspect of oppression afflicting the African people. Each successive novel reflects her growing understanding of the nature of the African's oppression. As her narrative structure develops, she learns to develop her theme artistically so as to provide accurate presentation. One can perceive a progressive, thematic and structural development in her works.

As Toni Morrison develops her narrative from one novel to another novel, her concerns become more and more universal and political. Her fictional world does not marginalize men but her focus is on the sensitive women of the African-American Diaspora. For her, each individual is different and hence she treats each with the special attention they deserve. In her novels, the black woman emerges as a woman of power. Though victimized by a racist society or skewed perceptions of others they are galvanized into action. The black women's power resides in the strength of her conviction and her willingness to place her life in a historical perspective which recognizes her ancestral heritage. The existence of community is both her challenge and salvation. She must both protect her individuality and preserve her traditions.

While exploring the dynamics of 'racism', 'sexism' and 'classism', Toni Morrison does not limit herself to an indictment of the dominant white class only. She turns her gaze to the problems within the black community as she relentlessly exposes intra-racism, black male brutalities, female sexual abuse, and incest. Thus, without directly denouncing white society, she valorizes the black community. By indirection the novelist avoids the polarization of black and

white humanity – one as inherently good and the other as irrevocably corrupt – thereby allowing all people to vicariously experience a rebirth. Thus, the novelist brilliantly succeeds in her attempt to elevate through fictional art the reclaimable and beautiful in the human condition.

Toni Morrison made her debut as a novelist in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye* and soon gained attention for her poetic imagery, fabulistic quality, richly expressive depictions of black America, and the wonderful richness and variety of her language. Set in a small mid western town in Lorain, Ohio during the depression, *The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks yet on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women. *The Bluest Eye* mainly focuses on racial oppression. The novel focuses on Pecola, an eleven-year-old black girl who believes she is ugly and longs for blue eyes. Her fixation leads to insanity where she withdraws into a world of fantasy. The novelist addresses the conflict between black identity and white cultural values, and the psychological and emotional effects of victimization. She demonstrates the influence of European white beauty on the self image of the African-American female child.

The second novel *Sula* (1973) mainly lays stress on gender violence. The novelist is concerned with the struggle for individual rights in general and woman's rights in particular. It is a novel about black women's friendships and about good and evil. *Sula* not only breaks with popular stereotypes of black women in western literature, but creates one of the few black women heroines to deliberately embrace the role of a pariah. *Sula* had a wider perception than *The Bluest Eye* and brought her national recognition.

The third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), which received the "National Book Critics Award" and the "Friends of American Writers Award", established Toni Morrison as a major American Woman novelist. It is the first of her novels to have a male character as a primary protagonist. The novel deals with the issue of class in relation to race and gender. *Song of Solomon* creates a magical world out of four generations of black life in America. The power of the novel is in her use of black mythology and the strength of its elements of black culture. It is a story of Milkman Dead, who is torn between the altruistic values of his aunt and materialism of his father embarks on a journey where he discovers the greatness of African-American heritage and the nature of love and faith. Toni Morrison was highly appreciated for her portrayal of

Milkman's spiritual transformation and critics lauded her marvellous blending of fantasy and realism.

The fourth novel is *Tar Baby* (1981). It is a truly public novel about the condition of society, examining the relationships between blacks and whites, men and women, and civilization and nature. The novel changes location from the geographical boundaries of the United States to the larger context of the Caribbean and Europe. It is filled with allusion of African-American folklore and mythology. In this novel the novelist has shown that racism and sexism emerge from capitalism. The novel focuses on the relationship between Jadine Child, a black educated model and William Greene called Son. The novel is set in an isolated West Indian Island of Isle de Chevaliers, examines the conflicts that arise when one attempts 'to deny one's past'. It is the story of a man in search of nourishment and of a woman whose nourishing powers have been defused. The book is praised for its provocative themes and beautiful, complex symbolism.

The fifth novel *Beloved* (1987), is a master piece of her fiction which won the 'Pulitzer Prize for fiction'. It deals with the history of slavery. It is the story of what happens in the silences of trauma. The novel reveals the lives of its two main characters, Sethe and Paul D. Both are former slaves trying to create lives for themselves in the wake of decimating and pervasive personal histories. Both are forever marked by the legacy of their individual experiences with American slavery. It is an attempt to enter the consciousness of individuals who were enslaved and to animate the feelings that must have been associated with so much uncertainty, loss, and violation. In the novel, the personification is made manifest in the character Beloved that can be seen as a representation, a personification of all the trauma and catastrophic human cost of the Middle Passage and slavery. It also artistically dramatizes a haunting amalgam of the past and present experiences of an escaped female slave, tracing the heroine's quest for meaning and wholeness in slavery and in freedom. The novelist sketches the events that led to Sethe's crime and focuses on how the stories of the past have been inscribed on the bodies of black women. Though critics have contended the depiction of violence and humiliation in the novel, Toni Morrison's rendering of slavery and its psychological manifestations can be considered the most affecting in contemporary American literature.

The sixth novel is *Jazz* (1992), the second of a trilogy of Toni Morrison's novels reflecting on the idea of love and its manifestations. It depicts the Harlem of 1920s as a symbol of freedom and excitement for many African-Americans. It tells the story of the New York neighbourhood Harlem from the perspective of its ordinary inhabitants, namely Joe and Violet Trace. The couple is at the centre of the novel's investigation of the complexities faced by those millions of African-Americans who moved from the rural South to the North during the Great Migration in search of jobs and a better life in the cities. Thus, it is a disturbing psychological study of a childless African-American couple desperately seeking to come to terms with their frustrations and aspirations. Their fragmented, directionless lives propel them towards the grotesque and the absurd. Toni Morrison has used the mode of Jazz to depict the experience of black community in the city of New York during the 1920's, a decade itself known as Jazz age. *Jazz* brings out the cultural unconscious of history that sustains in good as well as bad times.

Paradise (1997) is her seventh novel. It is her first novel after winning the Nobel Prize for literature. It is the third in the series of her novels exploring themes from African-American history. It is an exploration of the impact of and desire for control of human behaviour. It is a story set in a small Oklahoma community and coils back and forth through a century of imagined history to explain the intention behind a group of men attack a convent, now occupied by unconventional women fleeing from abusive husbands or unhappy pasts. Moving freely between eras, Toni Morrison explores the founding of Ruby, an all-black township, the backgrounds of the convent women and the men determined to kill them. *Beloved* is about slavery. *Jazz* deals with urban life in the jazz era; and *Paradise* is set in contemporary times. It is inspired by the stories of all black communities established after slavery came to an end. In *Paradise*, the African-American women of various ages and various backgrounds find freedom and happiness in isolation from a racial and sexually oppressive society in a convent in Oklahoma far away from everywhere.

Love (2003) is her eighth novel. This novel is Toni Morrison's elegy for the vital black society that was lost with desegregation. The novel is a Faulknerian symphony of passion and hatred, power and perversity, colour and class that spans three generations of black women in a fading beach town. In life, Bill Cosey enjoyed the affections of many women, who would do almost anything to gain his favour. In death his hold on them - Wife, daughter, granddaughter, and employee, mistress may be even stronger. As her protagonists stake their furious claim on

Cosey's memory and estate, using everything from intrigue to outright violence, she creates a work that is shrewd, funny, erotic, and heart wrenching.

A Mercy (2008) is her ninth novel. In this novel, the novelist goes back to the beginning of slavery in America in the late seventeenth century, a period during which America was far more diverse and complex than is generally imagined today. It provides a detailed outlook at the social environment of class distinction, racial hatred and religious persecution that allowed the institution of slavery to take root in the U.S. With broad strokes of history the writer tries to explore the impact on the personal choices of individuals caught in history. The novel includes Portuguese, Dutch, English, Native American, African, and mixed-race characters, all vying for a place in this new world. Neither religious freedom nor religious tolerance is given, and while the Southern colonies are clearly strongholds of slavery, the North is by no means an innocent bystander. Diseases such as measles and smallpox run rampant. Nevertheless, there is an Eden-like quality in the beauty and richness of this new world, along with many decencies that transcend the evil elements.

Home (2012) is her 10th novel, the shortest one with 150 pages, published in 2012. This is also Toni Morrison's one of the few male-protagonist novels besides her deviation from writing epic-length books. In *Home*, the novelist returns to the 1950s, an era she remembers, to mine the traumatic possibilities of the Korean war and of biological experiments on African-Americans. It is a deeply moving novel about an apparently defeated man finding his manhood - and his home. *Home* is a taut and tortured story about one man's desperate search for himself in a world disfigured by war. It tells the story of Frank Money, the novel's main character, a 24-year-old African-American veteran traumatized by his experiences in the Korean War. He has been back in America for a year, but feels too violent and dislocated to go home to Georgia, where his younger sister still lives. *Home* begins with a dreamlike sequence in which two children - a brother and sister - witness a horrific event while out roaming the Georgia countryside.

God Help the Child (2015) is the 11th novel with 192 pages published by Alfred A. Knopf on April 30, 2015. The novel mines lyrical power and human strength from childhood suffering.

Toni Morrison revisits one of the main thematic concerns, child abuse and trauma, of her premier novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in her latest book *God Help the Child*. She has actually dealt profusely with all sorts of child maltreatment in her oeuvre. In her recent narrative, Morrison weaves a tangled web of childhood trauma stories, in which all of the characters have suffered some kind of abuse: neglect, witnessing domestic violence, emotional and psychological abuse, molestation, sexual abuse, etc. She shows how the child's exposure to traumatic experiences has dramatic far reaching effects into adulthood, such as psychological, emotional, behavioral and social problems.

Morrison explores the curse of the past, the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, and its hold on the present, through the phenomenon of colorism. Racism and intra-racial discrimination based on the skin color result in childhood trauma. Children may adopt coping strategies to resist maltreatment or they may internalize oppression and accept self-loathing. Violence generates violence, a vicious cycle which will eventually make the victims future victimizers. Nonetheless, *God Help the Child* is not only about childhood abuse and trauma, but it is also about transformation and healing. Morrison describes the characters' restorative journeys towards redemption.

God Help the Child can be classified into 4 parts. Part-1 of the novel, opens with Sweetness, who explains that her poor treatment of Lula Ann (called "Bride" in the present), her dark-skinned daughter, was not her fault because racism forced her to prepare the child for a hard life. Morrison introduces Bride, the protagonist, as a beautiful, glamorous woman who is unable to move on after Booker Stabern, her lover, abruptly leaves her. Bride attempts to burnish her self-esteem by taking money, an air-travel voucher, and make-up to Sofia Huxley, a woman convicted of child sexual abuse charges in part based on false testimony Bride gave 15 years prior. Unable to recover psychologically after the attack, Bride obsesses over Booker and tries to ignore the fact that her body is physically reverting to that of a pre-pubescent girl. In Part-2 of the novel, Bride discovers that Booker's forwarding address is in a small town called Whiskey, so she heads out in her Jaguar to find him. Bride rams her car into a tree on a country road and is forced to recuperate for six weeks with a hippie couple and their feral foster daughter, Rain, who shares stories about her life as a child sex worker before her foster parents rescued her. Bride leaves the family after six weeks and finishes her journey to Whiskey. In Part-3, Booker, who has been absent for most of the narrative, assumes center stage. Booker is the product of a family

that fractured after Adam, Booker's older brother, was kidnapped and killed by a sexual predator. Booker became a graduate student of economics years later and ended his relationship with his family over his refusal to let go of his brother. Bookers meets and instantly falls in love with Bride at a concert. Booker's idealistic romance with Bride, told in flashbacks, ends abruptly when Booker is disgusted by Bride's plan to meet Sofia (he is not aware of Bride's false testimony). In Part-4 of the novel, Booker and Bride reunite after listening to the advice of Queen Olive, an aunt with whom Booker stays after leaving Bride and breaking his arm. Queen Olive sustains serious burns in a fire she set, and Booker and Bride bond as they watch over her. When Queen Olive dies, the two bury her and Bride announces that she is pregnant with Booker's child. At the end of the novel, the two have decided to stay together, and Sweetness predicts a rude awakening for Bride as Bride attempts to become a mother.

In her book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison seeks to expand the study of American Literature. She explains in the preface that her inspiration for the book has come around 1983, from the reading of Marie Cardinal's autobiography 'The words to say it'. The book focuses on how language can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural harmony and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which is by no means marginal or already and completely known or knowable. In the book, she also undertakes the task of showing that "Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness - from its origins through its integrated or disintegrated twentieth century self." Critics have praised the work as a thoughtful and original examination of how literary criticism has perpetuated the racism inherent in American society.

As a writer with an extraordinary mind her novels gained attention of both critics and wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue and her richly expressive and poetically charged depictions of black America. Her work of literary criticism established her as a genius who has probed the complex recesses of African-American history and culture. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has described Toni Morrison as a "subtle craftsman and a compelling weaver of tales" and "the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature". (*Alice Walker : Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ix). It is precisely Toni Morrison's subtle and challenging craft that fascinates and attracts the readers.

The novelist constantly forwards her interest in challenging the political, social, racial and gender hierarchies in the American literary discourse. By placing a woman at the centre of her novels, she takes a historical approach in order to reconstruct African-American history. To appreciate a Toni Morrison novel is in a sense to appreciate history that under grinds her works. Her use of history is designed to critique those who forgot it, those who never learned it and those who refused to pass it on. Each novel represents a different movement in history and extends her meditation on contemporary African-American life.

Thus Toni Morrison joins the ranks of other great black writers, as an established writer charged with the cultural and artistic representation of the life and history of her people. She has become a kind of literary Moses stripping away the notions of whiteness and blackness and her readers are moved by the power of her language in rendering the rich cultural life of their past. She, with her novels, accomplished a distinct place as a writer because she scrutinized and initiated her writing with a critical essay on the internalized racial categories that has enduringly foiled black woman's prudence and the description of black woman's self. In life and in art, the outstanding achievements of Toni Morrison enlarge and extend the tradition of the strength, persistence and accomplishments of black women in America.

References

- 1) Dinah Birch., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- 2) Bajaj Nirmal., *Perspectives of Afro-American Fiction: Perspectives on the Afro-American Novel*. ed. Tarlochan Singh Anand, Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1983. Print.
- 3) Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Appiah. K.A. *Alice Walker : Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York : Amistad, 1993. Print.
- 4) Harihar Kulkarni., *Black Feminist Fiction*. New Delhi : Creative Books, 1999. Print.
- 5) Karen Carmean., *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*. New York: The Whitson Publishing Co., 1993. Print.
- 6) Patrick Bryce Bjork., *The Novels of Toni Morrison : The Search for Self and Place within the Community*. New York : Peter Lang, 1996. Print.
- 7) Harold Bloom., ed. *Toni Morrison*. New York : Chelsea House, 1990. Print.