

Female Perspective In The Novels Of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Toni Morrison graduated from Howard in 1953 and entered Cornell University that fall under the influence of De facto Segregation, it was not easy for a black women to get higher education. As an African American female writer, she realizes the dilemma that 'Black Women' have to encounter in the process of pursuing individuality and devotes herself to write about Black women's experience under the dominant power. The Black women in Morrison's novels meet various difficulties which come from sexual and social discrimination. As a result, they undergo great pain at different levels; and are tortured in body, mind and spirit. The paper focuses on the female characters that Morrison deals with in her pre and post Nobel Prize novels. For her, the Nobel prize was not only her own honour but also the glory of her people. Through her books, Morrison felt, she could let more readers know the beauty of African American Culture and the condition of women, that had been neglected for a long time. The 'Black woman', her pain and her perspective is the main concern when Morrison plans her characters.

Keywords : Black woman, individuality, pain, discrimination, perspective

Paper

The first African American woman to be so honoured, Morrison felt a sense of triumph when she went to collect her Nobel prize. In her own words, "I felt a lot of 'we' excitement. It was as if the whole category of female writers and black writers had been redeemed. I felt I represented a whole world of women who either were silenced or who have never the exposure of the literary world" (Dreifus, 75). She tries her best to depict different women experiences in her novels and each female character has some features that draw one's attention. Adolescent girls are characters that often appear in Morrison's stories. Unlike the common young people, these girls have no choice but to accept some trauma instead of possessing the happiness of their youth. One of the features of Morrison's adolescent girls is that they get hurt and enter the adult world early. In *The Bluest Eye*, the black girl Pecola Breedlove is one such girl.

Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is a black girl who has an unloving childhood just because of her blackness. Teachers ignore her in the classroom, giving their attention instead to a "high-yellow dream child with long brown hair" (BE, 47) and 'sole green eyes' (BE, 48). The storekeeper who sells Mary Jane candies to Pecola avoids touching her hand when she pays money. Little black boys jeer and taunt her with 'Black emo, black emo. Yaddaddsl-upsneeked' (BE,50). Even her parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove treat Pecola in this way. Ironically named since they breed not love but violence and misery, Cholly and Pauline eventually destroy their daughter under the pathos of their defeated lives. Pauline too like Pecola is despised by the snooty black women who snicker at her lame foot, her unstraight her, and her provincial speech. Her husband is an irresponsible drunk; the son and daughter are slovens. Pauline, eventually gives up her own family and her love to Pecola and takes refuge in the soft beauty in the Fisher home where she gets power, praise and work.

Cholly is abandoned on a garbage dump by his mother when he is young and years later he searches for the father who also discards him. Like Pauline, Cholly is driven by personal demons, which he attempts to purge in violence against his family. After Pauline leaving home, he retreats from his

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emotional dependence and is also humiliated by economic powerlessness. While Pecola's ugliness is an excuse for Pauline to leave home, it is also a sad reminder to Cholly. One day while returning home drunk and full of self pity, Cholly sees Pecola and is overcome with love and regret that he has nothing to relieve her helplessness. "Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duct. What could he do for her ever? What give her"? What say to her? What could a burned out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven year old daughter?" (BE, 127). His answer is rape. Pecola is raped by her father and has a baby. At the end of the story, Pecola's baby is dead and she goes mad. Without the love from her family, exclusion from the community and rape from her father, Pecola is drawn quickly away from her adolescence. She loses her innocence and has to bear the burden of being a mother. It also becomes too much for her to face the racial discrimination and family violence at the same time. With no one to help her to counteract the love of white dolls with blue eyes, Pecola cannot help herself and is obliged to become a victim.

Morrison wants to draw the reader's attention on the white standard of beauty by penning the shocking circumstance. As Furman print out, "Pecola's sad fantasy expresses Morrison's strongest criticism of a white standard of beauty that excludes most black women and destroys those who strive to measure up but cannot" (P.19). For Pecola, "The smiling white face of Mary Jane on the candy wrapper, blonde hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. (BE, 38) Pecola truly believes that nothing bad could be viewed by such eyes. Her parents would not fight; her teachers and classmates would not despise her; she would be safe" (BE,42). Furman thinks that perhaps Pecola is right because "with the blue eyes of her distorted reality comes the awful safety of oblivion" (P,19).

Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, also talks about black girlhood and extends to describe black womanhood. Moreover, she describes the community's response to one who dares to defy all narrowly conceived ideologies of women. The novelist creates another feature for her female characters and that is the women treated as an outsider. The centre of *Sula* is the relationship between Sula and her friend Nel. Their friendship is traced from 1922, when they were twelve years old to Sula's death in 1940. The things that bind them together throughout their adolescence are their happiness in daydreaming, their loneliness and their culpability for death of Chicken little a little boy they have known in their neighbourhood. Their relationship is disrupted by Nel's marriage to Jude Green. After the wedding, Sula leaves her hometown, Bottom. Then years later, she comes back only to shock all the people in Bottom. Sula's return is accompanied by a plague of robbing. Peach points out that "in the Bible and in African literature, the plague can often only be lifted by a sacrifice on the part of the community itself" (P,50). The death of the robin is a hint to reader that Sula's coming back means an evil or unfortunate thing will happen. There begins a conflict between Sula and her community Sula has physical relations with white men, even seduces Nel's husband and the black men label her a bitch who cannot be forgiven.

Sula refuses to honour the town's ceremonies: "She came to their church suppers without underwear, bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it- relishing nothing. They believed that she was laughing at their God (Sula, 99). People claim that she deliberately watched her mother burn to death and thus treat Sula as a devil. "So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkle salt on porch steps" (Sula,113). The increasing tension between Sula and the community alienates Sula to the margin. "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself"(Sula,92) can explain why she does those things. Sula's pursuit of freedom and individuality become a kind of challenge of social norms and traditional values. As Morrison says, "Nel knows and believes in all the laws of the community, she believes in its values. She does not believe in any of those laws and brakes them all, or ignores them (Stepo,381). To the end she proclaims "I sure did live in this world..... I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me" (Sula,64) Sula's 'me-ness' remains the same. She doesn't betray herself as Nel, and any loneliness she feels is the price she paid for freedom and individuality. To the very end, Sula remains on the margin, excluded from the essential rites of burial within the community. But ironically, Sula is only one in the African community who dares to seek freedom and selfness that black people have been

pursuing for a long time. The irony that the outcast is essential to the community's self-definition is a common motif in Morrison's novels, including *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.

Another outcast woman is Sethe, a former fugitive slave who has extraordinary capacity for love and sacrifice in Morrison's "Ghost story", *Beloved*. Slavery in America is a historical fact. Different from other novelists who write about slavery, Morrison breaks with the realism of slave narratives and historical fiction by making a ghost a main character. The suffering of slavery and the ghost make Sethe become a tortured woman whose feature is living in a painful life because of some trauma in the past or now.

Born as a slave, Sethe is forced to face the brutal reality of slavery: even when she becomes a mother she has to endure it. She knows that her children do not belong to her. They are property, subject to be sold, traded, raped, and beaten. In order to make them safe, she and her children have to escape. First the children run and later she is pregnant with a baby that she delivers enroute to freedom. After she reaches Ohio, under the care of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, Sethe begins to claim herself and her children. She nurses her babies and kisses them from "the tops of their heads to their tight round bellies (Beloved, 94). For twenty-eight days the cycle of preparation a woman's body needs to begin a new life Sethe's mother-love is unrestrained. She remembers that her love felt "good and right... and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I love em more after I got here. Or may be I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mint to love"(Beloved,162). Because of the great but extraordinary love, when School teacher comes to take her children back to slavery, Sethe revolts. Sethe kills her two years old daughter, and she attempts to kill the other three children before she is stopped, because she wants to place them "where no one could hurt them ...where they would be safe" (Beloved, 163). Then the dead baby becomes a spiteful ghost and haunts Sethe's house.

Two of Sethe's children Howard and Bugler run away because the hatred of the ghost is so strong and nobody can make it out of the house. Equally powerful are the memories that filter thought Sethe's consciousness as she goes about her daily routines. Despite the attempts to suppress them. Sethe's memories haunt and torture her. Accompanied by the ghost and the memories, Sethe is also tortured by the doubts from the people in the community. After holding themselves at a distance and not warning Sethe, people in the community gather but do not sing the song of customary unedifying ceremony when Sethe is taken to jail. Later they rumour doubts about Sethe's past: did she really escape from slavery in her condition? Was Baby Suggs' son really the father of her children? At Baby Sug funeral, they don't eat Sethe's food but only eat the food they brought. After that no one comes to Sethe's home. Sethe and her Daughter, Denver, live solitarily at the margin of the community for almost twenty years.

What can torture Sethe so much? The first reason must be slavery system and the second could be Sethe's love her children. As Furman points out, "Slavery makes love risky, even dangerous" 71). Just like Paul D Says, "especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit: everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, may be you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (Beloved, 45). But Sethe does not love so mildly. She would not see them return to slavery. "The best thing she was, was her children, Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best things, her beautiful, magic best thing the part of her that was clean"(Beloved, 251). Through the tortured Sethe and her infanticide, Morrison successfully inverts the conventional thinking.

Under the issues of race and gender, Morrison often arranges more difficulties for her female characters to encounter than other woman writers. In Barbara Christian's essay. "*Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison*," she points out that Morrison creates artist figures who must contend with ultimately subvert and larger racist and sexist structures of hierarchy and domination (483-500). Before the tortured characters get strength to live blissfully, they have to encounter some difficulties. With the physical and mental journey, they can find a protective shelter for themselves. Sometimes they need instructors to guide them to experience the process of rebirth. With Barbara Christian's

essay, it is clear why and how Morrison creates her various kinds of women: the women who are

tortured in body, such as Mavis, Sweetie and Pecola the educated woman who are tortured in mind under the oppression of intra-racism and patriarchy, like Petricia: or the woman with spiritual-magical power, like Lone and Consolata. Morrison's purpose of creating her unique female characters of the body, the mind and the spirit is to create a distinctly 'Black Woman' who had been left out of literature. Morrison's ideal paradise is not as the transcendent realm of normative Christian traditions, but as more flexible, inclusive communities on earth.

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