



## INTERCONNECTED ATROCITIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE NARRATIVE CONSTELLATIONS IN TONI MORRISON'S DEPICTIONS OF BLACK WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

Kanchan Lata Bhardwaj<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Vijeta Gautam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, C.C.S University, Meerut

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, K.M.G.G.P.G. College, Badalpur (G.B. Nagar)

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### Abstract

This study delves into the intertwined narratives and thematic constellations within Toni Morrison's novels, focusing on the harrowing experiences and resilience of Black women. By examining the atrocities faced by these characters, the research highlights Morrison's intricate storytelling techniques and the interconnected nature of her works. Through a comparative analysis, the study explores how Morrison's novels, individually and collectively, shed light on the systemic oppression, personal traumas, and cultural heritage of Black women. This exploration not only underscores the pervasive struggles depicted in Morrison's oeuvre but also celebrates the profound sense of community and identity that emerges from these narrative constellations. The research aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of Morrison's literary contributions, emphasizing the critical role of interconnected stories in portraying the multifaceted realities of Black womanhood. By analysing the literary devices and symbolic elements Morrison uses, the study illuminates how her novels not only portray the atrocities endured by Black women but also celebrate their endurance, resistance, and agency.

**Key words:** Toni Morrison, Black women, Interconnected stories Systemic Oppression Personal trauma, Cultural heritage

### Introduction

Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize-winning author, is renowned for her profound and intricate storytelling that delves deeply into the African American experience. Her novels are often interlinked, forming a complex web of themes, characters, and historical contexts. This

paper explores the interconnected nature of Morrison's narratives, examining how she weaves together various stories to create a cohesive and multifaceted portrayal of African American life. Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is an initiation tale about a Black adolescent tortured by white beauty

standards and yearning to have blue eyes. A second book, *Sula*, was released in 1973 and explores a variety of topics, including the dynamics of friendship and social pressures to fit in. With the release of *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison gained widespread recognition. The story is recounted by a man who is trying to figure out who he is. Set on a Caribbean island, *Tar Baby* (1981) examines tensions with sex, race, and class. The true story of a runaway slave who kills her young daughter to avoid a life of slavery at the point of recapture is the basis for the critically acclaimed 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*. In 1998, Oprah Winfrey starred in a film adaptation of the novel. Furthermore, Morrison penned the libretto for Margaret Garner's opera (2005), which was based on the same tale that served as the basis for *Beloved*.

*Jazz*, a violent and passionate tale set in 1920s Harlem, New York City, was published by Morrison in 1992. The novels that followed were *Love* (2003), a complex family tale that illuminates the various dimensions of love and its seeming antithesis, and *Paradise* (1998), a vividly described portrayal of a Black utopian village in Oklahoma. (2008) *A Mercy* examines slavery in America during the 17th century. In the 2012 film *The Redemptive Home*, a scarred Korean War veteran faces racism upon his homecoming and then musters the will to save his sister from apathy. In *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison used the story of *Bride*, a Black girl with dark coloring born to light-skinned parents, to illustrate the effects of child abuse and neglect.

1992 saw the publication of a critical study titled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected writings, Speeches, and Meditations* (2019) and *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (2008; edited by Carolyn C. Denard) both contain collections of Morrison's writings and speeches. Several children's books, such as the *Who's Got Game?* series, *The Book About Mean People* (2002), and

*Please, Louise* (2014), were co-written by her and her son, Slade Morrison. She also wrote the book *Remember* (2004), which tells the story of Black pupils' struggles during the integration of American public schools. It is geared toward young readers and consists of old photos with text that speculate about the individuals' sentiments. Morrison received the Coretta Scott King Award for that effort.

The Black American experience is the main theme of Morrison's books; her characters fight to define their identities and cultural heritage in an unfair society. Her stories had a lot of depth and texture because of the way she interwoven the mythic, used imagination, and wrote in a sinuous poetic style. Morrison was appointed an officer of the French Legion of Honour in 2010. She received the American Presidential Medal of Freedom two years later. A documentary about Toni Morrison's life and career is titled *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (2019).

### Methodology

This study employs a comparative literary analysis, examining a selection of Morrison's novels to identify recurring themes, narrative structures, and character archetypes. The primary texts analysed include "*Beloved*," "*The Bluest Eye*," and "*Sula*." Secondary sources include scholarly articles, interviews with Morrison, and critical essays that provide insights into her narrative techniques and thematic concerns. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: the depiction of systemic oppression and personal trauma, the use of interconnected stories, and the representation of cultural heritage and community.

### Systemic Oppression and Personal Trauma

Morrison's novels frequently explore the systemic oppression faced by Black women, portraying it as a pervasive force that shapes their identities and experiences. In "*The Bluest Eye*," Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes symbolizes the internalization of white beauty standards and the resulting self-loathing. This

novel starkly illustrates how societal racism and sexism inflict deep psychological wounds on Black women.

In "Beloved," the character Sethe's traumatic past as a slave haunts her present, illustrating the enduring impact of historical atrocities on Black women's lives. Sethe's act of infanticide, driven by a desperate desire to protect her child from slavery, underscores the extreme measures Black women have taken to assert their agency in the face of systemic violence. Through Sethe's story, Morrison delves into the generational trauma inflicted by slavery and its lingering effects on Black families.

"Sula" explores the complexities of friendship and betrayal between two Black women, Sula and Nel. The novel examines how their identities and choices are shaped by the oppressive environment of their community. Sula's defiance of societal norms and Nel's adherence to them highlight the different strategies Black women employ to navigate a world that consistently marginalizes them.

### Thematic Interconnections

Morrison's novels are united by recurring themes that reflect the African American experience, including the legacy of slavery, the search for identity, and the complexities of love and community. For instance, "Beloved" and "Song of Solomon" both explore the haunting legacy of slavery, albeit in different ways. In "Beloved," the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter symbolizes the inescapable trauma of slavery, while "Song of Solomon" delves into the generational impact of this history through the protagonist's journey to discover his heritage.

Toni Morrison is a writer who frequently uses symbolism, conflict, and meaning in her novels *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*. These three works each depict and feature a variety of topics that are occasionally found in each other. Although Morrison covers a wide range of topics in her books, some recur

more frequently and are more prominent: themes related to race, gender, appearance, identity struggles, and love, lust, and passion.

Toni Morrison's novels frequently explore the theme of racism and its profound impact on African-American lives. In *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist, Milkman, learns about the harsh realities of racism through characters like Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy, and through Guitar, who reveals the lingering effects of slavery and racist violence. Historical events such as Emmett Till's lynching highlight these issues, driving Guitar to join a revenge group, the Seven Days. Milkman's quest for his heritage uncovers his great-grandfather's flight from slavery, illustrating the deep-seated family troubles rooted in this legacy.

*Beloved* focuses on the brutal experiences of former slaves Sethe and Paul D. Paul D.'s harrowing memories from the Sweet Home plantation reveal the persistent cruelty even at so-called "nice" plantations, leaving indelible scars on him, Sethe, Sixo, and Halle. (Morrison, 1998, pp.3-4)

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison addresses internalized racism within the black community. The Breedlove family suffers from external and internalized racism, with Cholly's traumatic experiences shaping him into a destructive force within his family. Mrs. Breedlove's contrasting demeanour at home and at her white employers' house highlights the desperation of her situation. Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* consistently explore the theme of identity struggles. Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* yearns for blue eyes to escape her perceived ugliness and hatred. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's journey to uncover his family history represents his quest for personal identity, while Ruth and Guitar also struggle with their senses of self. *Beloved* portrays Sethe's identity crisis stemming from guilt over her daughter's death and her struggle to find her place after escaping slavery, paralleled by Paul

D.'s and Denver's quests for self-understanding and freedom from the past. Through these characters, Morrison illustrates the complex maturation process and the profound impact of personal and historical experiences on identity. (Morrison, 1993, p.38)

The novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison delves into the intricacies of love, desire, and lust, frequently emphasizing the detrimental consequences of sexual assault. In *The Bluest Eye*, the rape of Pecola's father shattering her innocence leads to a tragic pregnancy and further breakdown of the family. Morrison draws a contrast between Pecola's violent maltreatment and her desire for love. In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar's maddening obsession with Milkman causes her to go insane, highlighting the devastation that can result from unrequited love (quoted in Sanders, 2005, p.42). Guitar's comment to Hagar emphasizes how pointless it is to try to control someone else. *Beloved* portrays Sethe's battle to love herself and her kids in the wake of her husband's disappearance, while Paul D.'s yearning for affection and sex shows the degrading aspects of slavery.

Although Morrison uses a wide range of themes, they all work together to broaden her message and reveal realities about African-American lives and society. These themes—many of which are rooted in injustices—allow the reader to comprehend her stories better and give them more motivation to make changes.

Morrison often revisits characters across her novels, creating a sense of continuity and shared universe. Pilate Dead from "*Song of Solomon*" reappears in "*Tar Baby*," serving as a bridge between the two stories. This overlap not only enriches the reader's understanding of these characters but also highlights the interconnectedness of African American experiences across different times and places (Morrison, 1998, p.4).

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison follows Sethe, a survivor of slavery who escapes Sweet Home plantation to live with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in Cincinnati. When her former master tries to reclaim her, Sethe kills her youngest daughter. The arrival of Paul D, a fellow Sweet Home escapee, and the mysterious *Beloved*, who represents the past, begins Sethe's emotional healing.

Sethe's daughter, Denver, clings to *Beloved* as a sister. Her sons, Howard and Buglar, flee the haunted house. Sethe's husband, Halle, is the son of Baby Suggs, who withdraws into depression after Sethe's act.

Key helpers include Stamp Paid, who ferries Sethe across the Ohio River; Amy Denver, who aids Sethe during her escape; and Ella, who helps rescue Sethe from *Beloved*. Community figures like Lady Jones and Edward Bodwin support Sethe and Denver." (Higginbotham, 1996, p.197)

The Sweet Home plantation shifts from the relatively benign rule of Mr. Garner to the cruelty of Schoolteacher, who tortures the slaves, culminating in the brutal death of Sixo. The novel explores the lasting trauma of slavery and the struggle for healing.

The societal roles that men and women are expected to play are contrasted throughout Toni Morrison's books; *Song of Solomon* is a prime example of this theme. Macon Dead personifies the emphasis on self-interest held by masculine characters, since he is consumed by wealth and power. He counsels Milkman, his son, to put ownership and control first. In contrast, women who are supposed to conform to subordinate roles, such as Ruth and Corinthians, are portrayed as weaker and less educated. Corinthians, for example, demonstrates the restricted social acceptance of independent-minded women by struggling to find a husband as a result of her degree.

Through his unethical actions, Cholly Breedlove, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*,



embodies unfavourable stereotypes about black men and incites scorn from the community. Morrison also addresses the issue of women who are abandoned, showing males who depart and leaving women to deal with the fallout. The relationships between Paul D. and Sethe, Milkman and Hagar, Solomon and Ryna, and Halle and Sethe all exhibit this pattern. Morrison challenges the inflexible and frequently harmful gender stereotypes that are enforced by society through these tales.

### Historical Contexts

Each of Morrison's novels is set against a specific historical backdrop, which she meticulously reconstructs to provide authenticity and depth. "The Bluest Eye," set in the aftermath of the Great Depression, examines the devastating impact of racial self-loathing. In contrast, "Jazz" captures the vibrancy and chaos of Harlem during the 1920s. Despite these varied settings, Morrison's consistent focus on the African American struggle for dignity and self-identity ties these historical narratives together.

Toni Morrison's literary works are profoundly rooted in historical contexts, reflecting the African American experience across different periods. In "The Bluest Eye" (1970), set in Lorain, Ohio, post-Great Depression, Morrison addresses the impact of racial self-loathing instilled by white beauty standards. "Sula" (1973) explores the dynamics of friendship and community among African American women in a segregated Ohio community from the 1920s to the 1940s. "Song of Solomon" (1977) spans from the 1930s to the 1960s, tracing a protagonist's journey to uncover his family history in Michigan and Virginia. "Tar Baby" (1981), set in the Caribbean and the United States, delves into race, class, and gender complexities during the late 20th century. "Beloved" (1987), based on a true story, examines the horrors of slavery and its aftermath in post-Civil War America.

In "Jazz" (1992), set in Harlem during the 1920s, Morrison captures the vibrancy of the Harlem Renaissance while exploring love and obsession. "Paradise" (1997) examines race, religion, and community dynamics in an all-black town in Oklahoma from the 1940s to the 1970s. "A Mercy" (2008), set in the late 17th century, explores early American slavery and the diverse origins of American society. "Home" (2012) follows a Korean War veteran's return to a racially segregated America in the 1950s, highlighting the struggles of African American veterans. "God Help the Child" (2015) addresses contemporary issues of child abuse, trauma, and race in a modern setting. Morrison's works intricately weave historical and social contexts, offering profound insights into the African American experience and broader American history, resonating deeply in contemporary discussions on race, identity, and memory.

### Narrative Techniques

Morrison employs a range of narrative techniques that enhance the interconnectedness of her stories. Her use of non-linear timelines, multiple perspectives, and symbolic language creates a rich tapestry of interconnected narratives. For example, the fragmented structure of "Beloved" mirrors the fragmented lives of the characters, while the use of multiple perspectives in "A Mercy" allows for a multifaceted exploration of early American society. Morrison explores themes in art and briefly discusses these concepts to help readers better understand the more intricate problem of her narrative style. First of all, she emphasizes the magical power of art in her stories (many of her characters are magical). Art, like magic, has both constructive and destructive uses. Morrison's characters possess a devastating power that is especially evident in tempting popular media like blue songs and movies. Popular art encourages viewers to immerse themselves in fantastical settings where they might learn to adapt the conventions of fiction to real-world situations or use it as a means of escape from reality. A distinct type of

interaction between the narrator and the reader emerges, in which both parties are "corrupted by the messages" of Morrison uses the storytelling tradition in a way that involves dialogue between the author, the character, and the audience. The shifting of viewpoints when narrating a story illustrates how obviously polyphonic her work is. Without providing any authorial validation or analysis of the characters' points of view, the author concedes the truth of each character's perception and consciousness. Therefore, the narrator in Morrison's literature refrains from adopting the position of any character or allowing their morality to dictate the story.

Each character contributes a different portion of the same story when it is being narrated, and as a result, the story's meaning or the character's personality are developed during the improvisation process that completes the story.

### Symbolism and Imagery

Recurring symbols and images further link Morrison's novels. The motif of flight in "Song of Solomon" symbolizes escape and liberation, a theme that resonates with the experiences of other characters across her works. Similarly, the image of the tree, which appears in "Beloved" as Sethe's scar and in "A Mercy" as a symbol of shelter and community, serves as a powerful metaphor for resilience and survival. Tom Morrison's work is rich in symbolism and imagery, which serve to deepen the thematic layers and evoke emotional responses from the audience. Through carefully crafted symbols and vivid imagery, Morrison creates a visual and conceptual landscape that enhances the reader's understanding of the narrative and its underlying themes. Whether it's through recurring motifs, metaphorical representations, or sensory descriptions, Morrison's use of symbolism and imagery adds depth and complexity to his art, inviting readers to explore layers of meaning beyond the surface of the text. Symbols have the potential to be very

powerful in literature. Toni Morrison employs symbols liberally in her writing to express deeper meanings and give her novels more layers of complexity. Morrison typically relies on symbols, which he makes very plain for the reader to pick up on. She chooses a sign, or symbols, and weaves them throughout the whole book, making a plethora of links. Occasionally, her works also have the same or comparable symbols. Three of Morrison's works—*Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Jazz*—serve as excellent examples of this, with significant objects, character names, and titles having extremely symbolic meanings. Character names are one inventive way Toni Morrison employs symbols in her writing, and this is evident in every one of her books. For instance, she assigns biblical names to a number of characters in *Song of Solomon*, such as Pilate, Solomon, Reba, Hagar, and Ruth—*jesus-pilate-1*—in order to give those characters' greater nuance and establish a connection to a well-known person. Morrison also purposefully gives each character a name that corresponds with their personality (Chakravarty, 2007, pp.138-139).

In Toni Morrison's works, names carry deep symbolic weight. In *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church's name reflects his complex nature: "Church" suggests a past as a preacher, while "Soaphead" indicates his meticulous personality and his need to "wash" away his immoral thoughts about young girls (*The Bluest Eye* 166). Similarly, in *Jazz*, Violet's name changes to "Violent" as her character transforms from a gentle figure to one driven by jealousy and rage, illustrated by her attempt to harm a corpse (*Jazz* 79). Through these names, Morrison adds layers of meaning to her characters and themes.

Toni Morrison's novel titles carry deep symbolic meaning and enhance the narratives. In "Song of Solomon," the title references the Bible and introduces biblical symbolism, while also referring to Solomon, the great-grandfather of the protagonist Milkman Dead, and a song

about Solomon's flight crucial to Milkman's heritage quest. In "The Bluest Eye," the title reflects Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes, symbolizing her longing for whiteness and rejection of her own appearance, with the motif of eyes highlighting her obsession. "Jazz" signifies the connection to the 1926 jazz era, with music setting moods, characterizing scenes, and underscoring African American culture. Morrison's thoughtful titles add depth and complexity to her novels (West, 1998, p.301). In her works, Toni Morrison employs simple objects as powerful symbols to convey deeper meanings and the inner lives of her characters. In "Song of Solomon," artificial roses symbolize the constrained and unfulfilled lives of Lena and Corinthians due to their social class and family dynamics. Similarly, in "The Bluest Eye," a blue-eyed baby doll received by Claudia MacTeer at Christmas highlights society's idolization of white beauty standards, impacting young black girls like Claudia. In "Jazz," Morrison uses birds as symbols, such as a parrot that represents Violet's trapped emotions and red-winged birds symbolizing freedom. These objects recur throughout her novels, allowing Morrison to subtly communicate complex themes without explicit exposition (Morrison, 1989, pp.40-41).

Without a question, Morrison has perfected the art of using symbols in her writing. She has discovered a means to infuse symbolic meaning into even the smallest number of words using elements like character names, novel titles, and significant items. A skilled writer can elucidate the components of their work, but an even more skilled writer can write in an abstract manner, leaving the reader to ponder about the meaning behind the words.

### Conclusion

Toni Morrison's novels are intricately connected through their thematic concerns, character overlaps, historical contexts, narrative techniques, and recurring symbols. By weaving together these elements, Morrison creates a cohesive and compelling portrayal of African

American life. Her interconnected stories not only enrich our understanding of her characters and themes but also underscore the shared experiences and histories that shape the African American community. This study of Morrison's narrative constellations reveals the depth and complexity of her literary universe, highlighting her profound impact on American literature.

Morrison's literature thus represents the dialogic relationship between the writer and the reader. Additionally, the story reveals the author's moral principles, encouraging the reader to comment and take part in the writing process. Morrison engages us in a conversation between the writer and the reader by using storytelling techniques in her writing. Her books provide as excellent examples of the dialogic author-audience relationship and the relationship between narrative and ethical experience. Furthermore, the ideological implications of story-telling strategies in conveying historical memories and experiences cannot be disentangled from them. Morrison actually questions our moral convictions. Her moral handling of the intricate circumstances in *Beloved* broadens our comprehension of racism, which isn't adequately covered in any history book. While Morrison does not pass judgment on the character's difficult choices, she does denounce racism and slavery as factors that have caused mothers to kill their children. We are prompted to reevaluate the moral dilemmas in our social lives by her literary portrayal of the mother's challenging choice.

Toni Morrison's novels offer a rich and nuanced portrayal of Black women's struggles and resilience. Through her use of interconnected stories, non-linear narratives, and multiple perspectives, Morrison creates a complex tapestry that reflects the multifaceted realities of Black womanhood. Her works shed light on the systemic oppression and personal traumas faced by Black women, while also celebrating their cultural heritage and communal bonds. This comparative study of Morrison's novels underscores her profound

impact on literature and her enduring legacy in portraying the lived experiences of Black women.

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