



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

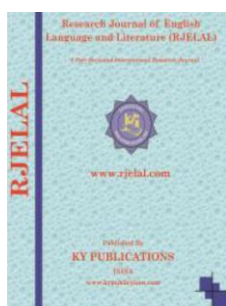
DIALOGUING THE FEMALE SENSIBILITY THROUGH THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

SHAHBAZ A. HAQUE

Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra (M.S.)

Email: shahbazhaq@gmail.com

doi: doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.444



ABSTRACT

African American Literature proceeds to prosper to this day with the help of authors like Toni Morrison who have been rated among the top writers in the United States of America. Nowadays it has been accepted as an essential component of American Literature, with the top-selling novels of Toni Morrison like *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Sula*, *Jazz*, etc. Toni Morrison offers a glimpse into the interpretation of African American experience and the exposition of that reality. In her novel, the feminist protagonist explore the issues of freedom and equality which were denied not only by the Whites of America but also by the Black males.

African American Literature is the depiction of feeble voices of the Black American people living in racially discriminated society of America. The Black Americans had to face innumerable difficulties in the belligerent atmosphere of White dominance. At the beginning of the 20th century, the tumultuous social experience of the Blacks in the White society led to the arousal of freedom from slavery and the right to live with equality. The novels of African American writers especially Toni Morrison ignited the capability of the marginal's through the fretful stories of their forefathers.

Toni Morrison portrayed the acerbic inside track of the Black Americans by the Whites. Her novels impersonated the prohibition of various rights and responsibilities of the Black Americans in mainstream society and publicized the violent brawls against the Whites. In this way, the novels of Toni Morrison exposed the extreme brutalities and the futuristic dilemmas of the marginal's. In 1993, Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of her achievements as a novelist of outstanding talent. The award represented the culmination of a series of accolades

that have followed Morrison after the publication of each of her six novels before the award. These novels have become classics in American literature and have been the subject of extensive critical study like *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon* and *Home*.

The Bluest Eye provides the internalized depiction of white beauty standards deforming the lives of black girls and women. The emotional, physical and psychological states of black woman were never respected. Black females suffered the agony not only from the white patriarchs but also from their black counterparts.

The novel shows the longing of the female to obtain power and a sense of position in the world. In the introduction, the narrator Claudia in her thoughts gives that

"... there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941 It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds".

Pecola is the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* who is described as fragile and delicate child when

the novel begins, and by the novel's close, she has been almost completely destroyed by violence. At the beginning of the novel, two desires form the basis of her emotional life: first, she wants to learn how to get people to love her; second, when forced to witness her parents' brutal fights, she simply wants to disappear. Neither wish is granted, and Pecola is forced further and further into her fantasy world, which is her only defense against the pain of her existence. She believes that being granted the blue eyes that she wishes for would change both how others see her and what she is forced to see. At the novel's end, she delusively believes that her wish has been granted, but only at the cost of her sanity. Pecola's fate is a fate worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world.

Morrison portrays Pecola as the symbol of the black community's self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Others in the community, including her mother, father, and Geraldine, act out their own self-hatred by expressing hatred toward her. At the end of the novel, we are told that Pecola has been a scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them feel comparatively lucky, and her silence has given them the opportunity for speaking. Thus she becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering. The Bluest Eye is the psychological destruction of the Black female's mind by both the majority White community and by the African American community.

Generally women seek comfort in motherliness but for the Black slave it is a great source of sorrow. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison discusses the African American motherhood. Carole Davies and Anne Graves have described the motherliness as a "beautiful ugliness", in their edited book, *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. This oxymoron stresses the fact that although giving birth is beautiful, for the Black women, it is just an ugly act of bringing an innocent human being into an oppressive world. Giving birth is a great beauty but slave owners do not let this beauty to last for a long time. Toni Morrison has been particular in presenting this motherliness in many situations. Sethe has all the qualities which

characterize her as a woman and a mother. Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves quote:

One has to read Sethe, as a particular Black woman, as the concentration of female identity, not as its aberration . . . And significantly, while she can flee slavery, she cannot flee motherhood or the body that has been captured by the needs of her children.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is set in the post Civil War period in rural Ohio. It is based on a historical record of a slave called Margaret Garner in 1851. In fact, it is a historical fact that a Black woman, like Margaret Garner preferred to terminate her children's life, rather than let them succumb to the cruelty of enslavement. Morrison has revealed this predilection in Guthrie Taylor's *Conversations with Toni Morrison*:

The Abolitionists made a great deal out of her case because she had escaped from Kentucky with her four children . . . She had been caught as a fugitive. And she made up her mind that they would not suffer the way she had and it was better for them to die.

In this way, Morrison attempted a special task to re-write this history, excavating up the hidden Black woman's story from consciousness of the nation. She announces this in Denise Heinze's, *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness" in Toni Morrison's Novels*:

This had got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia.

Hence, Toni Morrison has created *Beloved* as ". . . not a story to pass on". It is just a normal story of a mother and her incomparable love towards her daughter in an oppressive environment given in a mythical way. Through this novel, Morrison has chosen both the issues of slavery and victimisation of slave women as the themes. S. Gubar and S. Gilbert have defined slavery in *The*

Mad Woman in the Attic as “a patriarchal institution in which both slaves and wives-and especially slaves who function as wives and wives who function like slaves-are used and abused”. This comparison between wives and slaves clearly shows the coincidence of both feministic and racist oppression.

Morrison was surrounded by an environment of feminist discourses that encouraged woman to come together instead of developing hostile attitudes between themselves. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison wanted to show an example of this new form of sisterhood through her characters Sula and Nel:

She had clung to Nel as the closest thing . . .
. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude (Nel's husband) . . . They had always shared . . . Marriage, apparently, had changed all that . . . she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to.

Sula also lived a life against the stereotypic life of Black females. She was regarded as a devil by the neighbourhood females, who would sexually seduce their husbands. In the fear of Sula, all the Black women in the neighbourhood started to love one another. “They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst”. Morrison keeps in mind these types of relationships in a Black neighbourhood from which she grew up, at the same time she shows the external forces that could damage this form of sisterhood.

If Sula shows necessity of sisterhood among the Black women, the novel *Love*, shows various forms of love that are necessary for women. The novel is set mainly in 1990s East American coast country, is a tale of childhood confusion, miscommunication and its consequences. Bill Cosey is the Black who is the proprietor of the once popular Cosey's Hotel and Resort and his women are Heed, Christine and May, the wife, granddaughter and daughter-in-law respectively live in a town called Silk. Bill Cosey inherits his wealth from his father and is a courthouse informer and a great

fancier of money. An extravagant, romantic, charming and morally doubtful, Bill Cosey marries Heed, an uneducated eleven year old child at an old age. Cosey has suddenly lost his son to ‘walking pneumonia,’ and his mentally unsound daughter-in-law, May, outwardly jealous of Heed, keeps her away from her own daughter, Christine. May fears on Heed Christian friendship is expressed in the thoughts of an unknown narrator as:

. . . a bottlefly let in through the door, already buzzing at the food table... if settled on Christine . . . bound to smear her with the garbage . . . If Heed and Christine had ideas about being friends and behaving like sisters . . . May put a stop to them. If she couldn't swat the bottlefly, she could tear its wings, Raid-spray the air so it couldn't breathe . . .

Christine and Heed, similar in age, are already connected and are friends. There are years of misunderstanding between the girls. They compete endlessly for Cosey's love and affection which continues even after his death, and ultimately develop a deep hatred for one another. There is only a thin line between love and hate and eventually after years of full hatred, their conflicts are finally settled with the help of their errand boy, Romen Gibbons and a young outsider named Junior Viviane.

Heed compares herself to Junior Viviane and becomes closer to her for the reason that both are thrust into the world at the tender age of eleven. Junior is comparatively educated, depends on her brains and common sense for her means of living. On the other hand, Heed, is ignorant and relies on manipulation and cheating for her method of living. Heed a misguided child, mistakenly believes that her marriage to Cosey is her way out of her problems. Romen is an honest soul, in the novel, who saves a girl during a gang rape. Romen's grandparents, Sandler and Vida Gibbons, act as good examples for their communication guiding him for that good behaviour. If Sula shows the need for sisterhood among the Black women, *Love* shows the role of envy, selfishness among the new generation of Black girls that are to be conquered by the Black

women to maintain the sisterhood which could fetch them freedom from oppression.

In *Jazz*, during Violet's childhood, her father had deserted the family with a heavy debt. Violet's mother Rose Dear, bewildered, sat the dining table, sipping from an empty cup as the debt collectors emptied the house, took the dining table, sliding Rose Dear out of her chair. Rose Dear's mother, True Belle, left her job in Baltimore and arrived to take care of her daughter and grandchildren. Rose Dear kills herself by jumping into a well after four years, assuming that her children were in the good hands of her mother.

True Belle was a slave when she left Vesper County for Baltimore, but she was a free woman when she moved from Baltimore back to Vesper County, in 1888 to take care of her evicted daughter, Rose Dear. True Belle had no choice to go to Baltimore with, "Maybe she felt bad. Anyway, choiceless, she went, leaving her husband, sister, Rose Dear and May (children) behind, and if she worried, the blonde baby . . . kept her entertained for eighteen years . . .". The words like, 'felt bad', 'choiceless' shows the real situation of a Black slave women who had to leave her family for the whims and fancies of the master's family and had to convince herself with the beauty of the master's blonde son. Even after her years of hard work, True Belle had to influence her employer and former master, Vera Louise Gray that she has become old and she wanted to return to Vesper County to live her final days with her family. These incidents of True Belle's life show her confidence and determination in dealing with the hardships of life.

Morrison has shown that when one is victimised by a system or by other people, one needs the help and love of one's community to survive. Morrison in an interview, reveals that the actions of the past affect those of the present and only by understanding about one's history we understand the modern life. She has dealt with a three-century old story to re-enact the history and refresh our memories about the most terrible experience of Black people, especially women.

White male's racist and sexist dominations have seriously undermined Black women's

psychology. Most women, in one way or another, are subject to patriarchal oppression, each woman's specific needs, desires, and problems are greatly produced by her race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, educational experience, religion, and nationality. The experiences shared by white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists, are not the same as those experienced by women of color.

Morrison's novels were produced for the middle class who needed something to define themselves in a new society of industrial revolution. Morrison notes that "they [the middle class] had no art form to tell them how to behave in this new situation. So they produced an art form". These Afro-American novels addressed the middle class and the music and oral traditions of the Blacks addressed the lower classes. These novels became a sensation because they taught suitable methods and conveyed new experiences for a budding middle class.

References

Primary Sources

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage Books, 1999. Print.

---. *Sula*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.

---. *Beloved*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.

---. *Jazz*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.

---. *Love*. London: Vintage Books, 2004. Print.

Secondary Sources

Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892- 1976*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980. Print.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Writers*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985. 71. Print.

Collins, Patricia H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman, 1990. Print.

Davidson Basil. *The African Slave Trade*. Oxford: Marston Book Services Ltd, 1980. Print.

Gubar, Susan and Gilbert, Sandra. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. London: Yale University Press. 482. Print. Harris,

Heinze, Denise. *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness" in Toni Morrison's Novels*.

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993. Print.

Hill, Shirley A. "In Search of the Village: Black Motherhood in Transition," in *Black*

Intimacies: A Gender Perspective on Families and Relationships. California: Alta Mira Press, 2005. 120. Print.

Nancy F. Cott. "Historical Perspectives: The Equal Rights Amendments Conflict in the 1920s." ed. Marianne Hirsh and Evelyn Fox Keller, New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Smith, George Edmund. *Walking Proud: Black Men Living Beyond the Stereotypes*. Kensington Publication, 2001. Print.

Trudier Harris. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994. Print.
