

A GLIMPSE ON THE FICTIONAL WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

The writing is a brief introduction to the fictional works of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison who is popularly classified as “the black woman writer”. It includes Morrison’s achievement as a teacher, writer, and editor in a biased society. The paper portrays Morrison’s fictional work that uncovers the three-hundred-year- old unfairness existing in the American society in the form of segregation, racial and sexual oppression. It includes Morrison’s perspective in overcoming social and political prejudice existing in the society because of color discrimination. Morrison novels are thought-provoking more about the black people and the black world where the writer tries to touch the psyche of her black character. The writings can be viewed from different perspectives as they are convincing with imagery, foreshadowing, flashbacks, myth, inner monologues and authentic dialect. Though Morrison doesn’t believe in matriarchy or patriarchy the fictions are limited to female protagonists except for Song of Solomon. Morrison believes that the black female is doubly subjugated first from the outside world because of racism and inside own community because of patriarchy. The novels illuminate the complexity the Afro-Americans goes through in the path to living a normal life and be a part of the American Dream of success. The eleven fictional novels of Morrison mirror the nude truth of the American society and reflect the racial and sexual malevolence the black men and women underwent as a whole.

KEYWORDS: *Fictions and Non-Fictions of Morrison, Nobel Award, Racial Oppression, Slavery, Jim Crow Laws, Segregation*

INTRODUCTION

The black literary legend Toni Morrison brought the black world to the forefront through her writings. Morrison having been born and brought up in the North, a free state where neither slavery nor racism flourished in its full form was left untouched with the truth of racial segregation. When Morrison came to the South for higher education was a surprise to see separate water fountains for blacks and whites; separation of seats in buses and trains by using bars. Once, Morrison stole a wooden bar that was used in the rear side of a bus to separate the black passengers from the whites and sent it to her mother as a sad memento. Morrison recognized that reality is vague and the truth is frequently impossible to apprehend. Though Emancipation proclamation (1863) gave freedom to the chattel slaves and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865) banned bonded labor, the blacks were still marginalized and segregated from the mainstream. They were given the bottom position in all spheres of the economic, political and commercial ground. Even though the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) assured the ex-slaves the right to citizenship, they were aliens in their own land. The fiction *Beloved* is a successful challenge of Morrison to remember the sixty million Africans who gave away their life in the journey of the transatlantic slave trade. The evolution of “Bench by the Road” project is to keep alive the experience

of slavery which the ancestors have gone through to make their descendants a part and parcel of the American Dream of success.

THE LAUREATE

Toni Morrison is one of the leading figures in contemporary American fiction and the first black American woman to win the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature. "Calling Ms. Morrison 'a literary artist of the first rank,' the Swedish Academy statement went on to say: 'She delves into the language itself, a language she wants to liberate from the fetters of race. And she addresses us with the luster of poetry.'" (Grimes) Presenting the award to Morrison, "the Swedish Academy praised her for giving 'life to an essential aspect of American reality' in novels 'characterized by visionary force and poetic import.'" (Draper 215)

On the occasion of the Nobel Prize, Professor Sture Allen read out a literary critique and a quote from *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and said Ms. Morrison "regards the African presence in her country as a vital but unarticulated prerequisite for the fulfillment of the American Dream. Similarly, she sees whiteness in literature as having blackness as its constant companion, the racial other as its shadow." (Nobelprize.org) Maya Angelou feeling proud said for Morrison that "she has the insight of a shaman and the lyricism of a great poet" (Nobelprize.org)

THE FICTIONS OF MORRISON

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* was a step to be a writer but the novel was criticized for portraying the ugly truth of the black life in its raw form. The novel has a unique place in Morrison's life as "it comes out of a spiritual loneliness when she was a divorced, single mother, (...) and was trying to establish herself in the work world with a little support system." (Holloway 31) *The Bluest Eye* shows that the stereotypical image of race as superior and inferior leads to total destruction not only of a particular generation but of the whole nation. The story moves in and around a teen black girl Pecola who is a victim of race and sex both in the comfort zone of her home and community which is believed to be the safest place for a girl. She gets biased attitude both from the whites and blacks, the Geraldine. Because of her father's sexist outlook, she goes through an irrational state of mind and falls prey to her own ignorance. This book after many years got its credit and recognition as "*The Bluest Eye* is excerpted in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*." (Giroux 292) In 2000, the book was selected for Oprah's Book Club and remains as a magnificent piece of work.

Morrison's second novel *Sula* is a lavish piece of work which beautifully interpret love between two females where the varied world of the black male is discerned from the varied world of the female. "*Sula* is excerpted in a major American literary anthology, Random House's *The American Tradition in Literature*;" (Giroux 292). The relationship between female and female bonding is more powerful than male and female. The unconditional love of a mother Eva Peace for her children and love between two female friends Sula and Nel shows that no two species love is as strong as the love of two female species. *Sula* portrays race and gender oppression. When the protagonist Sula Peace returns to her hometown, she is compared with the plague of robins, an evil sign and a forewarning for the black community. Her unconventional lifestyle is marked as a sin by the people of Bottom. On the contrary, when Helene Sabat Wright faces derogatory racial remarks, as a substitute she gives a broad grin, which shows the defencelessness of the blacks against Jim Crow Laws. Most of the incident in the fiction reflects the truth prevailing in the American society at large. The black characters reverberate their experience and performance because of the white domination and to which Morrison

says: "I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. It's the complexity of how people behave under duress that is of interest to me". (Uma 7)

The third fictional novel *Song of Solomon* (1974) is a sumptuously, a genuine piece of work which is considered Morrison's first classic and lyrical novel. It is different from her other novels as the protagonist is a male and the motif of music is heard and felt throughout the novel. Morrison's brilliant imagination and love for her dynamic character is reflected in the names, as the Mercy Hospital is called 'No Mercy' and the first black baby born in it, is Milkman Dead. The contemporary folktale twirls around an unconventional name Milkman Dead whose quest for identity takes him to his ancestral place from where he learns about his great-grandfather Solomon. And, the bequest of slavery and racism that has created economic, political and cultural ugliness in the American society. He discovers his familial heritage and gains awareness about the pain and agony; brutality and deprivation his ancestors have endured to survive and be a part of the hegemonic world.

Morrison's fourth creative writing *Tar Baby* (1981) is the magnificently beautiful novel which draws our attention to feminism, racism, and classism. Morrison's delicate and powerful character through the setting describes the chauvinism present between the black and white, it discloses all the shades of liability and infidelity within black society. It's an attempt of Morrison to break the myths that the whites have knitted about the blacks and present the black world as it is at its core. As John Irving says that Morrison through her writings has triumphed over all the societal pragmatism where many black stories are entrapped in race and sex prejudice. Here, it is a story about a woman, her rage, her dreams and her freedom to lead a life of her own choice. "What's so powerful, and subtle, about Miss Morrison's presentation of the tension between blacks and whites is that she conveys it almost entirely through the suspicions and prejudices of her black characters. (...) Miss Morrison uncovers all the stereotypical racial fears felt by whites and blacks alike. Like any ambitious writer, she's unafraid to employ these stereotypes - she embraces the representative quality of her characters without embarrassment, and then proceeds to make them individuals too." (Irving) *Tar Baby* a challenging book reflects the disagreement and quarrel based on cultural partiality and intolerance which shows the blacks alienation from their root. It shows the shades of the inconsistency of a woman who has rejected her real heritage and cultural background to a foreign standard of living.

The fifth marvelous work of fiction, *Beloved* was a triumph for which Morrison received the "Pulitzer Prize" in 1988. *Beloved* reflect the truth of its age which is about a fugitive black slave woman, Margaret Garner who killed her daughter when she was about to be caught by her white master. In 1865, before going for prosecution she was surrounded by journalists and their questions. To each of their query's, she tries to justify her cruel act by saying that it was the only way she knew to prevent her child from the atrocious world of slavery. While editing *The Black Book* Morrison came across the truth from various newspaper clippings. This incredible truth haunted her memory, till Morrison found a medium to decant it as a powerful, captivating and mysterious fiction. Usha Puri in her essay *Toni Morrison: Redefining Feminine Space in Beloved* has said: "*Beloved* is a beautiful narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery, on the power of rememory, and the collective memories kept alive through oral tradition. It is also the story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and to keep their history alive. Morrison's self-conscious interest in the celebration of black women's strength, their values, and beliefs, stems from a desire to correct the wrongs that have been historically leveled against black women.

She seeks to celebrate the legends of black women like Baby Suggs and Sethe, and weave their dreams into myths that allow us to recover their past.” (Puri)

Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992) is a genre of music translated into literature, it is melancholic, vivacious and still unmoved narrative, set in the New York City during 1920’s Harlem Renaissance. Edna O’Brien in his reviews said that “This, however, is not Victorian England, but Harlem in the 1920’s, Harlem still relatively innocent, when crimes at least were crimes of passion and pity in some currency, Harlem permeated with the thrum of music, Harlem to which those black people who had run from want and violence came to find their stronger, riskier selves. In Ms. Morrison’s robust language we see the sidewalks, the curbstones, Egyptian beads, Kansas fried chicken, doors ajar to speakeasies, an invitation to the low-down hellfire induction of music and sex.” (O’Brien) It coalesces marital love and betrayal, passion and violence that ends with the murder of the young lady by her aged lover. Its focus is on gender solidarity through woman bonding which does not try to rationalize the seemingly weird behavior of the protagonist. “Don’t ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn’t fall in love, I rose in it.” (*Jazz*) The novel looks into the human perception that shapes the individual psyche and emphasizes on the endless transform of life. Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* is a symbol; it has the same Harlem setting of Black musical culture, heritage, and tradition. The music, style, idea, writing, and structure in the novel blend with African Americans distinct approach towards life and thought. The Blues and Jazz are the spiritual, sacred and pious black music’s which flows spontaneously in a natural way to freshen up the moods of the tired black slaves. It is an art form through which the slaves pacify their distinctiveness. In praising the fiction Richard Eder said that: “With *Jazz* Morrison has written a book that ruminates and discourses, that wanders into climaxes and wanders out of them, that follows its riffs through pain and celebration, that moves all the time while neither leaving the past nor disappearing into the future; that is, in her word, jazz.” (Draper 242)

Morrison’s seventh uncompromising work *Paradise* (1998) portrays the astounding description of a black utopian society; which is highly provocative, ecstatic and terrifying. The story is set in the middle of 1970’s in an all black community Ruby in rural Oklahoma. It is a visionary work of Morrison where each chapter has a beautiful name Ruby, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, Lone, and Save-Marie. The beginning opens with a horrendous scene of mass violence where four innocent young females were brutally murdered inside the Convent. “From Haven, a dream town in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven, a ghost town in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again.” (*Paradise* 5) The victims were staying in the Convent in the outskirts of the town Ruby, where they were cruelly murdered. The black men of Ruby were subjected to double discrimination from both whites and blacks that forced them to commit the heinous crime. It also shows how bit by bit the peace-loving black men were encouraged to have hatred and entrenched prejudice against this group of women. In the 17th century New World, women were targeted in the name of witch-hunt due to misogyny prevailing in that period but in the 20th-century feminist era four women fall prey to the ingrained century old prejudice and superstitions. It is a story of redemption, rebirth, and forgiveness where Morrison weaves myths, history into the memory of unforgettable past. “So when nine men decided to meet there, they had to run everybody off the place with shotguns before they could sit in the beams of their flashlights to take matters into their own hands. The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women.” (*Paradise* 11) According to Morrison the novel *Paradise* is the end of a ‘trilogy’ which started from *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Michiko Kakutani says

Morrison's *Paradise* "addresses the same great themes of her 1987 masterpiece, 'Beloved': the loss of innocence, the paralyzing power of ancient memories and the difficulty of accepting loss and change and pain. It, too, deals with the blighted legacy of slavery. It, too, examines the emotional and physical violence that human beings are capable of inflicting upon one another. And it, too, suggests that redemption is to be found not in obsessively remembering the past but in letting go. (...) It's a contrived, formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women, old against young, the past against the present." (Kakutani)

The eighth work of fiction *Love* (2003) is a striking mysterious family story which shows the countless aspect of love and the conflict arising out of it. The project explores the Afro-American history and culture, a wealthy man's commune life and his obsession with woman. The story puts in picture the secret life of Bill Cosey, the owner of Cosey Hotel and Resort, his relationship with several women and the gloominess that engulf the ambience after his death. The story is set in 1990, 1 Monarch Street in a town Silk, in the East coast of the United States. 'L' assumed to have the name 'Love' is the chief chef of the hotel, she knows Bill Cosey better than any woman in his life. 'L' is a strong and silent character, an eyewitness to all his love affairs and happenings of his life. As Nicole Moses states in 'Perfect Love' that "*Love*, is a story about just that: love, in all it's assorted varieties—familial, romantic, self, perverted, platonic and tough. And while the preface suggests a story 'that shows how brazen women can take a good man down,' what Morrison delivers is a vivid and stirring account of the turmoil that ensues when young women are deprived of parental—but mostly paternal—love and guidance that is their birthright. With *Love*, Ms. Morrison targets her usual mostly female and black audience, depicting African-American characters and splashing flashbacks of the Civil Rights Movement sprucely throughout. However, the messages she conveys—the importance of communication, self-esteem, education, soul-searching, relationships and human nature—are universal and timeless, transcending gender and race." (Moses)

A Mercy (2008) is Morrison's ninth fictive work of art that deals with slavery, race, gender and class in the 17th century America. The novel reflects the black experience, the expressiveness, willingness and meaningfulness which leap high above any race and sex prejudice. Morrison uses simple techniques to examine and observe the history of slavery in early America from different point of view. "Morrison's story unfolds in overlapping perspectives and is carried forward by astonishingly beautiful, often incantatory language that summons vivid dreamscapes and suggests an American history that seems more emotionally and physically real than reality itself. In *A Mercy*, Morrison creates a vast living, breathing world in very few pages. It is a marvel." (Mudge) *A Mercy* is a chronicle about a black slave mother and her daughter in the 17th century America when chattel slavery was legal. The slave mother takes a tough decision regarding her daughter and sends her to a budding farmhouse as a servant. The protagonist Florens get emotionally wounded because of her mother's decision and the memory of her mother haunts her every now and then. She falls in love with an ex-slave who is presently working as a blacksmith. Eventually, she understood the reason behind her mother's decision. "The structural device of the novel is lucid and thematically, it suggests numerous voices like Florens, the mistress, the Native American women in their household, the life of slaves and servants. Critically, the novel focuses on the contemporary life situation in America. It can fairly be argued that the novelist enquires into the roots of racism and this way she turns over the pages of earlier history of America and its social trends and practices." (Bala 165)

Morrison's tenth novel *Home* (2012) is about a Korean War veteran who is mentally disturbed and the difficulties he comes across because of racial discrimination in his journey to home. Home literally means the country, the motherland for whose honor he encounters the dangerous war, but after returning to his own country feels neurotic. Frank is an angry

young black man who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, like the black war veteran Shadrack in *Sula*. The novel explores the scenario of 1950 America when life appears to be comfortable, happy, nostalgic, after the Korean War. “Morrison returns to the 50s, an era she remembers, to mine the traumatic possibilities of the Korean war and of biological experiments on African-Americans. The two themes could have together neatly--black soldiers were experimented upon, to America’s eternal shame--but as one of Morrison’s subjects has always been violence against black women, she makes the victim of medical experiments the sister of a soldier.” (Churchwell)

The eleventh fiction, *God Help the Child* (2015) is about a very black girl, Lula Ann called Bride. A bride is a black, beautiful young lady with a prominent career in a cosmetic company. She had a pathetic childhood memory which hurts her every now and then. As her light colored father left her mother because he assumed that the baby was not from him. And, later on the rejection of her mother constantly reminds her of her ugliness. “‘It didn’t take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong,’ Sweetness says. ‘Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black.’” (*God Help the Child*) Successively, she transforms her weakness into strength and becomes a top model. But the look is superficial and over the course of time she finds herself shrinking, losing her womanhood, until she learns how to rise above appearances. Every character in the fictional story is touched by child abuse. The privilege a light skin color gets among the blacks is again a chauvinist attitude among the same race. Here, Morrison portrays the 21st century’s modern principle which is totally different from her previous work. “Child abuse cuts a jagged scar through Toni Morrison’s ‘God Help the Child,’ a brisk modern—day fairy tale with shades of the Brothers Grimm: imaginative cruelties visited on the children; a journey into the woods; a handsome, vanished lover; witchy older women and a blunt moral—‘What you do to children matters. And they might never forget.’” (Kara Walker)

CONCLUSIONS

The fictions of Morrison are an expansion of the history and recollection of the Afro-American strength, success and Folkways. It reveals the truth of the society as it is and portrays the unspeakable telling of the blacks from one generation to another. A presentation by Morrison at the Harvard University express the presence of blacks in the white world, as a glass bowl which contains the miniature seabed with all its complexity. Although it is transparent and fragile still holds the golden fish along with the pebbles and castles at its bed. The world inside the aquarium is embraced by its outer shield which does not disturb its peace and harmony. “The black ‘shadow’ has, paradoxically, allowed white culture to face its fear of freedom, Ms. Morrison continues. Though Pilgrim, colonist, immigrant and refugee embraced America for its promise of freedom, they were nevertheless terrified at the prospect of becoming failures and outcasts, engulfed by a boundless, untameable nature.” (Steiner)

Morrison believes race and sex issues are the main concern of the American society as they have to fight against both. Morrison does not believe in hating the white racist who hates black or black racist who hates white; instead shows concern on equality and respect in every field because the blacks are equally responsible for the construction of the virgin land into a powerful nation as the whites. Hence, the concern of Morrison is to stop the blacks from being used as a buffer in their own country. At the same time Morrison expresses that the presence of black in the country is balancing the conflict which would have risen due to the presence of different people from communities and religion.

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