

Looking Beyond Race And Sex, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* A Culture And Legacy

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper portrays the black Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison's determination to transform the black world into a chronicle which is their own, a culture which survived all odds and became a legacy to be conveyed to the imminent generation. In this paper, we find the endeavour of the visionary black writer, to embellish their history and preserve it in the dominant white world in spite of all diversities. The paper enters the intricate life of 19th century American society through the novel *Beloved* and reveals the struggle of the characters, for self-esteem and agency, where they failed to claim the ownership of their own offspring and self. The paper tries to confront every sphere of terror, disgust, physical and emotional scars, trauma of being black and woman, and the mental suffering when they couldn't free themselves from the times of yore. The paper divulges the cruel realities that tormented the female characters in the struggle against racial and sexual exploitations from a feminine perspective. The work disguises the details of white culture, people and their society. It concentrates on the desires of survival, healing of black souls through their culture and heritage.

KEYWORDS: Ingrained Prejudice; Psychological trauma; Racial Discrimination; Sexism; Subjugation; Wanton Cruelties.

Introduction

The Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, was the first Black American woman to win the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature. While presenting the award, "the Swedish Academy praised her for giving 'life to an essential aspect of American reality' in novels 'characterised by visionary force and poetic import'" (Draper, 1993:215). "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, 1993). *Beloved* was Morrison's fifth marvellous work of fiction, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. It was a triumph for the black Americans and the novel won several awards including the Anisfield-Wolf Award for race relations and American Book Award, a literary award given by one writer to another writer for outstanding literary achievement. Morrison's novel was characterized as thought-provoking and also visualising the essence of the black world. Her writings were convincing with imagery, foreshadow, flashbacks, myth, inner monologues and authentic dialect. Her writings illuminated the simplicity of the blacks and the three-hundred-year-old unfairness existing in American society, "... she regards the African presence in her country as a vital but unarticulated prerequisite for the fulfilment of the American dream. Similarly, she sees whiteness in literature as having blackness as its constant companion, the racial other as its shadow" (Morrison, 2017).

Toni Morrison (1931-2019), was an eminent writer, professor and an editor at Random House. She was formerly known as Chloe Anthony Wofford, born and brought up in Lorain, Ohio, United States. Her childhood days were spent in the loving and caring atmosphere of her parents George Wofford and Ramah Wofford. Morrison described her school and neighbourhood as of mixed-race people like Italian, Polish, Jewish and African-American. From her childhood, she gained knowledge about her



community, culture, ancestry and became acquainted with the myth and folklore of African ancient traditions. Her Grandma's folktales and ghost stories were a constant inspiration to create affinity towards their ancestry while she loved the classic Russian novels. Morrison parents were basically from the South so they had seen lynching, Jim Crow, Migration, and all sorts of prejudices against blacks but Morrison was born and brought up in the north where there was no racial discrimination but when she came to South for her graduation she witnessed racial segregation outside her university campus, while travelling in a bus. The seats were segregated for white and black people with the help of wooden bar.

Morrison's *Beloved* was a tribute to all those black slaves who died during the transatlantic slave trade, "Sixty Million and more" (p. v). The novel addressed the difficulties the liberated blacks went through because of keeping the horrific past submerged deep inside their mind. And, all the way through the narrative Morrison recreated: "a masterpiece of psychological and historical evocation which re-creates the 'interior life' of black slaves 'with a moving intensity no novelist has even approached before'" (Clemmons, 1987:110). The fiction was the result of Morrison's inspiration when she was an editor at the Random House, she read about the black fugitive woman while editing *The Black Book* who "was a kind of cause célèbre among abolitionists in 1855 or '56" (Rothstein, 1987). Margaret Garner the black fugitive killed her own daughter to protect her from slavery. "No, they're not going to live like that. They will not live the way I have lived" (Rothstein, 1987). The denial of guilt of the fugitive woman stirred Toni Morrison, and she gathered pieces of evidence from different libraries and century old newspaper cuttings, to know more about the news. Morrison's mind kept revolving around the dead child, till she created the re-embodiment of *Beloved*, "she is the slain infant returned to earth. 'I wanted it to be our past,' she said, 'which is haunting, and her past, which is haunting--the way memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it head on'" (Rothstein, 1987).

Racialism

According to the United Nations, racism means any type of discrimination on the basis of colour, ancestry or ethnic origin that has the result of prejudiced recognition. It is also preventing of one community from having equal footing in constitutional rights and fundamental freedom in political, economic and communal life, on the basis of its skin colour and different appearance. Racialism is also referred to as a sort of discrimination either in behaviour or belief, on the basis of class, culture and nation. It includes religious stereotypes, racial stereotypes, ethnic stereotypes, social stratification, symbolic or institutionalized forms of discrimination. Racialism in any form, intentionally or unintentionally, is malevolent and pejorative and is associated with race-based prejudice, loathe, oppression and violence. Racism is based on the belief that one race is intrinsically greater than the other, and the acceptance of stereotypical images of certain ethnic or population groups.

According to Richard Wasserstrom, "[R]acism and sexism consist in taking race and sex into account in a certain way, in the context of a specific set of institutional arrangements and specific ideology, which together create [a system of unjust institutions and unwarranted beliefs and attitudes] and [which together] maintain a system of unjust institutions and unwarranted beliefs and attitudes".

The century old history revealed that transatlantic slave trade and institution of slavery, is accountable for the formation of racism and racial segregation, especially in the United States in the 19th and early 20th century. Racism is hatred of one race and community towards another because of its colour and appearance. Racism can be defined under various categories like racial stereotypes, ethnic stereotypes, social stratification, symbolic or institutionalized forms of discrimination. Racial stereotype is a thought that can be adopted about certain types of individuals or groups that are differently conceptualized, though these thoughts or beliefs may not accurately reflect reality. Naomi Zack said that: "Racism refers to the ideological, structural and behavioural systems in society which deny and limit opportunities for some groups because of their racial identity in order to create and maintain a racial hierarchy (...)". The individual or group, who practiced racism, felt themselves responsible for the members of the economically and culturally dominant race that they should get the privileges and access to high status jobs, gain political, economic and social rights. And also make sure that the low-status race as per their survey like Afro-American, Indians in North America, blacks and coloured





people in South Africa; get only the low status jobs, insults and frequent acts and verbal expression of contempt, which have profound effects on social relationships. This sort of racial prejudice intentionally or unintentionally is malevolent and pejorative and is associated with violence, dislike and oppression.

Sexism

Sexism is ingrained prejudice against the person's gender, sex is biological but gender is a social construct. Sexism can affect any gender, predominantly the female community and has been characterised as hatred towards women. Chauvinism, discrimination and superciliousness are the creator of racism and sexism, where the biggest sufferer was the black women. "Sexism, with its accompanying horrors, mutilated the backs and minds of slave women and defiled their sexual beings and scarred them psychologically for all time" (Irfan, 2002: 85). During that period of time, there existed entrenched prejudice against women due to various reasons which included the belief that man was basically superior than woman. Besides, extreme sexism encouraged sexual harassment, rape and other forms of sexual violence against women for sexual gratification.

In consequence of ingrained prejudice, black females were treated pitilessly by the white masters who imprisoned, subjugated and used them as an object. Carby said that the role of a slave black woman was totally different in her domestic field. Both black females and males were sexually manhandled by their owners and forced to perform sexual relationships with one another. In addition, slaveholders forced the females to have sexual relationships with them and deliberately humiliated them in front of their male counterparts. Hazel V. Carby anticipated that there shouldn't be profanity in human-to-human relationships so also, between the master and his slave. "Sexuality can be used to tempt but must be placed within a shell of modesty, meekness, and chastity; in other words it must be repressed" (Carby, 1987:27). Though both black men and women were exploited under chattel slavery but the female had to endure additional brutality.

Discussions

In the novel *Baby Suggs* says how all her white masters used her for breeding purposes except Mr Garner. Baby remembers her old days when she was separated from her beloved husband and was sold numerous times to different white masters. She gave birth to eight children from six different men and helplessly witnessed all her seven children forcibly taken and sold to different people. "What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Her only son Halle, was able to stay with her: (...) Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye" (p. 28). She compared her stays at the Kentucky plantation when Mr Garner was alive as the best place because he allowed her to stay with her son Halle and didn't use her sexuality for breeding purposes, "...like they did in Carolina, or rented their sex out on other farms" (p. 165). Furthermore, Mr & Mrs Garner's approach was benevolent and humanitarian, they never scolded or thrashed Baby Suggs for her mistakes. "Even when she slipped in cow dung and broke every egg in her apron, nobody said you-black-bitch-what's-the-matter-with-you and nobody knocked her down" (p. 164).

When Mr Garner's was alive the black slaves were counted as humans, in the Kentucky Plantation, "their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to" (p. 147). Mr Garner was proud of his black men and named them as Paul A, Paul D and Paul F Garner, and preached that "if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too" (p. 12). The Sweet Home plantation was a secure abode for the black enslaves but after the death of its generous master, the plantation turned into a dreadful place. Even though, the new master was not as strong as Mr Garner but he seemed to be a man of principles. The master and his two nephews were polite, good and knew Jesus by His first name, he like the founding fathers of Virginia, kept all the daily happenings of the plantation in writings. When Halle prepared ink for him, he felt proud that the new master is writing about them but, within a short time, the black men's dream was shattered. The new master and his nephews frequently abused them and measured them with scales to keep pseudo-scholarly register of their being humans. The black men were shocked when the new master,





“broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight” (p. 11). He changed the previous rules and regulations, the things they were using before needed permission so, the black men were confused between taking and stealing. The new white master hits them persistently and tried to teach them new things which they couldn’t understand, “definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined” (p. 225). The black men who were used to Mr. Garner’s wholeheartedness were taken aback by the new master’s attitude.

During Mr. Garner’s time Halle bought freedom for his mother Baby Suggs, and then teen Sethe was brought to the plantation. The arrival of young Sethe made the five Sweet Home black men energetic. They waited for her to decide her man, “A year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life” (p. 12). And, after a year Sethe married Halle and had a happy family. When the Schoolteacher bought the plantation, Sethe was pregnant with her fourth child, but the new master ignored her delicate condition and thrashed her continuously and molested her. She bore all the tortures of the ruthless master silently until she learnt that all her children will be auctioned, her heart clamoured. Then, she and Halle decided to flee from the plantation along with their children. Sethe succeeded in sending her children to her mother-in-law’s place and was waiting for the right time to elope with Halle. But in the meantime, the Schoolteacher and his nephews sexually molested her but in spite of it when Sethe was released, her prime concern was her family, so she searched for Halle and not finding him escapes alone. On the other side, the innocent powerless black man seeing the rape of his wife felt humiliated, he covered his face with butter and hid in the dark shed, “how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it” (p. 84).

After Sethe ran away from the Kentucky plantation, she met the white enslaved girl Amy Denver in the dense forest and asked her for help. At first, Amy hesitated because she knew the strict laws and its consequences for helping a black fugitive, “‘Looka here who’s talking. I got more business here ’n you got. They catch you they cut your head off. Ain’t nobody after me but I know somebody after you.’ Amy pressed her fingers into the soles of the slavewoman’s feet” (p. 92). Amy was not interested in Sethe but seeing her pitiable condition nursed her and rubbed her hurting feet. But the moment Amy saw Sethe’s hurting back, she is taken aback because she has never seen such cruel treatment on any slaves before and soon recognized it a product of entrenched hatred. Amy described the deep abrasion and bruises on Sethe’s back as a, “A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk--it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. (...) Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don’t remember nothing like this” (p. 93). Amy seeing the condition of the black slave Sethe felt lucky that she wasn’t black. “Whoever planted that tree beat Mr. Buddy by a mile. Glad I ain’t you” (p. 94). Amy, like the readers, is astonished at Sethe’s inescapable situation.

The old woman, Baby Suggs never desired freedom but, when she breathed in the open air and walked through the streets of Cincinnati, she wondered how her son Halle, could think of freedom when he had never set foot in the free air. Baby remembered her son. “No question. And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self-made its home” (p. 165). Baby guided the blacks who came through the Underground Railroad, which was a secret network during the mid-nineteenth century America determined to provide shelters to fugitives. Baby hid the runaways and fostered those disfigured because of enslavement, she understood that being suppressed for years the blacks have become unresponsive to any internal stimulus. Hence, Baby assembled the children, adults and strangers in the clearing and taught them to sing, dance and enjoy their togetherness with the glory of life. She let them cry out loud and join hands to do the sunlit dance with naked feet. “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (p. 103). She named each individual body parts that should be liberated and taken care of, “More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (p. 104). Baby trained the people to kiss their hands, their body parts as nobody else will care for them, not even their white master’s for whom they laid down their whole life, they “only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty” (p. 103). From the day they were born, they were taught to obey the white masters and taught



that under every circumstance, “Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that ... they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down” (p. 247). Subsequently, Baby became a self-proclaimed preacher. She understood that these people were made to follow the orders of their white masters and stayed in dark places but when there is no one to control them they don’t know what to do? Baby tried to help them to lead a normal life.

Subsequently, giving birth to the baby girl in the forest, Sethe managed to cross the Ohio River with help of the Underground Railroad member, Stamp Paid and joined with her children. Sethe was very happy in the free atmosphere of the North along with her children and mother-in-law. She joined the fugitives and liberated blacks, in the clearing where Baby Suggs preached the value of liberation and freedom. While waiting for Halle, Sethe spends her time in the woods under the sunshine of freedom, feeling every moment of his return. So, after escaping from the plantation and claiming the 28 days of freedom, Sethe was not ready to give the ownership of her children to anyone, “she had claimed herself. Freeing your-self was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (p. 111-112). She doesn’t know the law but she knows her feelings and was not ready to go to the place where darkness and inhumane existed. So, the fragile mother stood rigid to protect her children from the darkness of slavery and went to the extreme limit. “Any life but not that one. I went to jail instead” (p. 50). The declaration of the Fugitive Slave Act shattered the whole world of Sethe and in the process to protect her children Sethe tried to kill them and succeeded in killing her first daughter. Sethe was sent to jail and her youngest daughter Denver accompanied her as she was on breastfeed. Because of the continuous efforts of the Bodwins, the good white people, Sethe was saved from death sentence and given life imprisonment.

Similarly, in another plantation Vashti and Joshua, the black chattel couple worked all day but at night, the wife is forced to escort their master’s son to bed. Joshua was restless but couldn’t do anything to help her wife as they were bonded slaves. Vashti endured silently all the sexual exploitation fearing that if they rebelled, they would be killed by the whites. Even Joshua pleaded in front of his wife but the white woman remained silent after hearing everything. She was helpless. Not finding any help Joshua endured the anguish and waited for Vashti. Vashti returned after a year, but Joshua was not pleased. Momentarily, he thought of killing her, but he suppressed all his anger and left the place alone. Later Joshua changed his name to Stamp Paid. His powerlessness to prevent the prostitution led to his desire to kill his wife which is ironically directed towards self-annihilation because of his legal subjugation. The daring and resilience needed to defend his wife were negating his survival. “She sat by the window looking out of it. ‘I’m back,’ she said. ‘I’m back, Josh.’ I looked at the back of her neck. She had a real small neck. I decided to break it. You know, like a twig—just snap it. I been low but that was as low as I ever got.’ (...) I changed my name.” (p. 275). After leaving the place and his wife, Joshua felt content thinking to himself that he had purchased his freedom by selling the nights of his wife. He changed his name to Stamp Paid, and became a member of the Underground Railroad and spent his remaining days helping the black fugitives to cross the Ohio River and provide shelters.

Findings

Morrison was an excellent weaver of stories; her passion was to submerge the readers in her enchanting world of language. When it appeared that the writer was disappearing from the turbulent reality, it was actually her incredible presence in the act. Major said that “Morrison is the type of writer who would tell me that she works hard to make the presence of the writer disappear”. Morrison’s tales expressed the considerable risks of the black characters, and portrayed their emotional and physical sufferings. The black writer’s accomplishments were the reclamation of black names, black identities, their languages, and histories in the forefront of the American portfolio against all probabilities. Her writings symbolically established the embezzled heritage of African Americans and transformed the desire of the white racist, “to wipe out an African’s name, identity, language, and history,” (Haley, 1976). She had successfully used writing as a weapon against white supremacy and achieved triumph in it. Through her works she had ignited the black style of writing, their tradition and language that comprehended its presence in the hegemonic world. “Morrison’s novels document the author’s awareness and concern for the historical conditions that sparked the

national struggle of African people against oppression and exploitation, thereby revealing her heightened consciousness of the interrelationship of race, gender and class” (Irfan, 2002:112). Her writings had revealed her concern to make the black descendant appreciate and accept the truth about their ancestry. Her motto was to educate them and make them understand that they shouldn’t run away from their roots and submerge themselves in white culture by trying to falsify their identity. “Toni Morrison’s ability to charge the vernacular with power and sound enables her to give a mythic form to the story of her people, the Afro-Americans. Oh my people cries Toni Morrison, hear the voice of the bard. This bard is a Blakean *griot* in whom the ancestral experience is stored and who can see and sing the past, present, and future” (Giroux, 1995:298). As per whites, the black Americans were contagious and from an alien civilization. Majority of white Americans still couldn’t accept blacks as part and parcel of their country and look at them differently. “Morrison calls Africanism a ‘trope’ and a ‘virus’; it is the way white Americans take over and mystify the life of the ‘unsettled and unsettling population’ they can neither accept nor ignore. Thus, American slaves, who all but disappear in white literature as historical victims, reemerge as ‘surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom.’” (Draper, 1993:259).

Karen E. Fields said that “*Beloved* has the property Walter Benjamin attributed to all great stories. Its essence is not expended in one telling”. Gradually, memories fade away but some keep recurring, unless one confronts it face to face, such is the ancestry of the blacks which had fragmented them, caused identity crisis, memories full of pain and denied past kept at bay. And in the process to forget the horrid past countless blacks struggled and detached from their roots, they tried to disconnect from the ancestors who have given their life for being a part of the hegemonic world. It’s the black woman, who, in spite of all hurdles had gathered and endeavoured to survive it like Sethe and Baby Suggs, so *Beloved* is “a postmodern romance which talks of many compelling advices regarding the historical rape of Black American women and their endurance to survive as human beings.” (Bala, 2012:114)

Conclusion

A deep look at the chronological narratives proved that both the Transatlantic slave trade and the Mayflower voyage equally contributed to the transformation of the Virgin land into a global hegemonic America. And, the novel *Beloved* continued as a stunning work of fiction about the commemoration of the bequest of slavery. It revived the black lineage and acknowledged the truth of discrimination in America and continued as an inscription for the upcoming generation. The Nobel laureate Morrison, used writing as a weapon, to symbolically establish the embezzled heritage and culture of Africans in America, and promoted their legacy for the creation of a unique generation attached to its roots. She succeeded in her endeavour to bind the black people, and convalesce their ancestry and keep the story of genesis of black culture alive.

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