



# **PSYCHE OF THE BLACK IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Nobel Laureate, creative writer, African-American woman novelist Toni Morrison began writing fiction in her maturity, and from the very first she expressed the themes that she would explore and develop in her subsequent work. She has written a body of work that is unified by continuity and development. No official biography of Toni Morrison exists to date, but future writers may note how her life story mirrors key event in African American history. Not surprisingly, her novels often take these events as themes, deepening readers' cultural knowledge of a past that, until recently, has not received the recognition that it deserves. From the 1970s to 1980s, many writers and scholars, Morrison included, struggled to bring that cultural knowledge into American consciousness; in 1993, when she became the first African-American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, that struggle reached a watershed moment. One of the most renowned black writers, Toni Morrison enjoys acclaim in all literary circles. Toni Morrison is not only a leading African American woman novelist, but also one of the most significant and relevant writers on the literary scene today.

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**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, self-identity, discovery, culture, African American

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Toni Morrison's writing is created purely from the black American experience. As the author of frequent criticism and social commentary, Morrison has shown herself as someone of considerable strength and skill in confronting the current realities. Toni Morrison's writing includes in its ambit the horrors of slavery, blood-drenched memories of painful experiences and their effects on the psyche of black characters. Thus being a black female writer, Morrison contributes in creating a literature which gives vent to her suppressed feelings.

Toni Morrison in her novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1999) depicts the problems of black people and tries to understand and interpret them. However in her fiction, she does not provide her readers with a simplified version of black life and experience but tries to highlight its different moorings and contours with all the possible complexities. To her the burden of race, gender and class is important for the reason that it represents an ideology behind such exploitations. The Afro-American experience reveals that Whites are the subjects and Blacks are the objects; Whites the victors and Blacks the vanquished; Whites the rulers and Blacks the ruled; Whites the colonizers and Blacks the colonized. Apart from race and class, gender is used by both the Whites as well as the Blacks to subordinate black women.

Combining the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women's Liberation, Morrison seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black. Exploring the complexity of black female experience in White America, Morrison attempts to resolve the contradiction inherent in her Afro-American identity. Morrison, as a 'Black Woman Writer' is concerned with the black community. In an interview with Salman Rushdie, she says:

I am not sure what the word 'negro' means, which is why I write books. What is black child/women/friend/mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, the fluidity, the contradictions. (39)

An aspiration for white values and the pressure to adopt the white Eurocentric life

style create catastrophic effects on black people. In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedloves believe that they are ugly. Though they have moved from south to North, they are unable to live in good houses but live in a poor locality. Pecola Breedlove, an adolescent Afro-American girl, believes that blue eyes alone would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. However, in reality her eyes cannot be changed into blue. Since she wants them desperately, her quest for blue eyes ultimately culminates in madness. Since the Breedloves believe in the dominant ideology, they cannot survive.

However, Morrison portrays another picture of black life through the MacTeer family and reveals how it survives.  
(Vernessa, 83)

The story of oppression and suppression of Blacks by the White masters in Bottom land in Medallion forms the background setting of the novel *Sula* in which inhabit its characters Eva Peace, Shadrack, Hannah, Helence, Plum, Nel and Sula. Unlike Pecola Breedlove, Sula Peace, a black girl, a member of a typical matriarchal family, lives her life boldly. Eva Peace, the grandmother of Sula, is also a rebel. To bring out Sula's uniqueness and personality traits, Morrison provides readers with another character of Sula's age, Nel Wright. Nel, like her mother, structures her life to suit middle-class ideas and values. She accepts Jude Greene as her husband, tries to raise a family and lives by the rules, codes and ideas prescribed by the dominant society. On the contrary, Sula challenges ideas, values, codes and standards of society and tries to create her own standards. Sula does not mind even if she is dismembered by society. In such a situation she becomes courageous, stands firmly on the ground, and asserts her individuality and revolts against the dominant ideology and cultural hegemony that obstruct her self-fulfillment.

In *Song of Solomon* Milkman's awareness of his self-identity and gender problem is very central to his quest. He consciously questions the dubious morality of the white race. He tells Guitar:

White men want us dead or quiet-which is the same thing as dead, White women same thing. They want us, you know, 'Universal' human, no race consciousness. Tame except in bed.

They like a little racial loin cloth in the bed. But outside the bed  
they want usto be individuals. (222)

It is this alienation from the socio-logical environment the propel Milkman and his quest. His quest takes him with knowledge, conscience, and a sensitive understanding of the black psyche. He looks at the black mind and black life with knowledgeable sympathy. His life passes through a conflict of living either like his father to become financially successful or like Pilate of create life of his own. This is an enlarged consciousness of the black problem as he understands the grim sufferings of the countless blacks in a white society.

*Tar Baby* brings the bounding of black and white women first time in Morrison's fiction. Margaret's point of view inside renders her larger than life. Born beautiful in a family of plain parents and ordinary siblings, Margaret is ignored, despised and finally left alone to make what she will of her assets. Valerian's wealth and elevated social position prohibit her friendship with Ondine with whom she feels comfortable. It is Ondine who understands the boredom and isolation of Margaret. Valerian keeps Margaret stupid and idle and she punishes him by sticking pins into his baby. Her baby she loves. Margaret emerges burnished by the fires of suffering redeemed and ready to take care of Valerian. She is able to make friends with Ondine and rekindle their brief youthful intimacy. Ondine keeps Margaret's secret about Michael's abuse because it is women stuff. Only she as a woman understands and explains Margaret's transference of anger from Valerian to Michael. While dealing with various racist and sexist issues, Morrison looks at the concepts of women bonding as a means of coming to an understanding of the self in *Beloved* more than in any other of her earlier novels. Morrison herself states:

Black culture survives everywhere pretty much the same, and  
that, Black People take their culture wherever they go. (86)

Pulitzer award winning novel *Beloved* unfolds the evils of slavery with its all pervasive inhuman effects. On a socio-psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of 'Sethe Suggs' quest, a wait for social freedom and psychological wholeness. She struggles with the haunting memory of her slave-post and retribution of *Beloved*, the ghost of the infant daughter whom she has killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. Murder

becomes Sethe's act of mother love, which she explains saying: "I took and put my babies where they would be safe." (163) Sethe's black awareness and rejection of white perception and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other selves as non-human are synthesized with her black feminist sense of self sufficiency. Unlike Son and Jadine, Paul D. and Sethe struggle together to forge a positive life under the most oppressing conditions.

*Crimes of Passion in Jazz* focuses on the idea of the African American couple who strive to have a successful life in New York City. From a psychological perspective, Joe and Violet are dysfunctional individuals, because they both try to overcome their frustrations and compensate for their racially generated shortcomings. The chapter captures the essence of the crimes that Joe and Violet commit, proving that violence is the direct result of a reckless psychological, social, and racial background, which invades the characters' tranquility. Joe and Violet's evolution in the novel revolves around the Black individuals' dramatic and hopeless search for a solid realm of emotional stability.

Toni Morrison's novel *Home* tells the story of Frank Money, whose extreme drama shapes the pathological universe of *Traumas in Home*. The chapter is divided into *Racial Codependency* and *Racial Autism*. The incredibly suggestive and almost naturalistic type of emotional pain which Frank Money endures in the fifth decade of racist America paves the way for the psychological phenomena of codependency and autism. Racism is the culprit and the enabler of Frank's codependency and autism. Both phenomena describe the main character's emotional handicap. He is unable to make healthy and mature choices.

After affirming racial struggle against slavery in *Beloved*, Morrison seems to have realized that the problem of gender, peculiar to women, can be solved only through focus on gender. Hence the thematic emphasis is on the unity of women. Separated from the man, the black woman had to depend on other women in the community who become:

A source of survival, information and psychic and emotional support. (Bethel, 179)

The novel *Paradise* focuses on the construction of a collective identity with a strong Biblical subtext, rendering its historical evolution as well as its different struggles for survival and conflicts with other groups threatening its sense of self. The narrative

articulation of the identity of the Haven community is done through the ain third person narrative of the novel, but also by means of inner or externally directed and articulated narratives of different characters who create or reiterate stories through recollection (with a sense of collective *jouissance*) which are embedded in the discourse of the heterodiegetic narrator (Genette, 1986). As F. K. Stanzel says: “remembering itself is a quasi-verbal process of silent narration by which the story receives an aesthetic form, primarily as a result of the selection and structuring inherent in recollection” (Stanzel, 84: 215). Experience is made intelligible when narrated (De Fina, 2003) by means of memory, which permits the recessing of the raw, compact, unprocessed, pre-expressed, prethmatic material (Kerby, 1991 : 7). Memory combines the visual and the verbal, the sensorial and the abstract, in a process of recovering a past reality that is related to the sacrament of a sense of self. Articulated through narrative, memory gives temporal order to past events that contain “incipient stories” and carves through the imagery, metaphors and myths that make up the continuum of experience, articulating and structuring them in whole coherent stories with meaning-making and identity-making functions.

*Psyche of the Black characters in Toni Morrison's novels* focuses on different aspects of psychology in the traumatic context of Toni Morrison's work. This aspect is meant to be an original experiment in which literature can transcend its boundaries and merge into the psychological phenomena. The touch of the pathological is what sets the psychological interpretations in motion, in the context of a deeply disturbing and traumatizing literary fiber. The contradictions and tensions exhibited by Toni Morrison's characters are the inevitable generators of different pathologies, transforming the individuals into the ideal subjects for psychic profiles.

The human psyche is dissected and analyzed within the psychological framework of racism which transforms Toni Morrison's

characters into captives of their own lives and of their own choices. Even though most of them are free individuals who are no longer oppressed slaves, they carry with them the invisible burden of another type of slavery, one that is exacerbated by the poisonous influence of racism. Like Zora Neale Hurston, Morrison's fiction challenges not only black people to "unearth the values that could restore the balance.....and give men and women the word to speak.....to set their spirits free." (91-92)

Morrison's novels reveal that she seeks to challenge:

The culture's assumptions inscribed in the binary oppositions of rural versus urban people, of old versus young, of the values and traditions, of the past versus those of the present, and male versus female roles and experience. (9)

As a novelist artistically dealing with African-American experience in her fiction, Morrison reaches out to the entire world, but more specifically to the third world countries like India. Emerging as it does from a specific political, economic, social and cultural experience, Morrison's work has considerable interest for the Indian people. The African-American experience and the post-colonial Indian experience have many similarities. The tendency of the colonized to imitate the colonizers' viewpoint seems to last much after attaining freedom. The inclination on the part of Indians to validate their thoughts and ideas with reference to western ideology reveals a need to reassess them and to reclaim their own heritage and culture as precisely is the case of African- Americans.

Toni Morrison's literary creations prove that the human psyche is subjected to pressure and trauma in every instance of the characters' evolution. They are individuals experiencing disfiguring moments, demonstrating the challenge which the understanding of the human psychological mechanisms poses. They face abominable situations that are almost impossible to tolerate. Slavery, racism, gender discrimination and quest for self are those instances that demonstrate, in Toni Morrison's works, the bestiality of a certain type of aggression whose consequences do not limit and do not end with the occurrence of a traumatic event, but extend into the realm of the pathology.

From the point of view of its literal meaning, slavery implies, in Toni Morrison's novels, a psychologically complex phenomenon as regards the brutality of hundreds of years of slave domination in the United States of America. From a social perspective, it is also the epitome of man's thirst for power and domination. Slavery can be broadly defined as the

constrictive limits imposed by an individual on another individual, in certain historical and psychological situations which encourage the development of such an abusive act. A sophisticated writer such as Toni Morrison did not and could not limit herself to delivering a literary product confined within the narrow walls of a strictly historical phenomenon. Her intention was to use slavery and, consequently, racism as the perfect argument for the broad psychological spectrum of emotions experienced by the modern Black selves and by former slaves. Racism is the insidious and beautifully adorned type of slavery which successfully captures the development of a psychologically efficient type of war which thrives on both visible and invisible means of action.

Toni Morrison's writing is created purely from the black American experience, from a recapturing of the past, both personal and that which she gathered from narratives. Morrison's exploration of communal black life is unique, specifically in the mid- western towns. Generally, through her main characters, in particular black women, she reveals the dynamic blacks, who live in such towns coming to grips with their search for selfhood in the meaningless world. Scholars such as Dexter Fisher, Robert Steptoe and Michael Harper suggest that:

Black American fiction displays not merely the consciousness of language but the consciousness of his people. A perusal of Negro fiction reveals the efforts of the Negroes to liberate themselves from the oppressive social system imposed upon them by the white Americans.

Toni Morrison is essentially a fictional artist, and not a historian or a sociologist. She presents an ideological representation of the African- American social reality. As an artist, Morrison negotiates a very complex matrix of reality in which she is both despised and revered. Her creative mediation between the real and fictive worlds generates possibilities rather than merely recording continued frustration and oppression. Today Morrison stands as a powerful figure on the international literary scene. Her place in American letters leaves her standing next to such eminent writers as Thoreau, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and William Faulkner. Morrison's message is that each person should and must respect the reality of the human landscape of the world, with its unlimited possibilities and interpretations, if mankind is to achieve wholeness and if the global community is once again to be whole.



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