

## **Pique of Victimized Identity & Voyage of Self Assertion in Toni Morrison' Fictional Oeuvre**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Afro American Literature has always propagated about the identity crisis, right from the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives (1830-1861), which got famous for themes demanding a careful insight into the submissive culture. From the very beginning, the Afro-American texts have institutionalized the ideals of dominating culture. The lives of black slaves have triggered such writings. For Afro-American authors, such as Toni Morrison, fiction has been a critical medium to symbolize the societal milieu, to represent racial discrimination, bigotry and social disgrace. The present paper reviews the life and fiction of Toni Morrison, and the chronic pain of being black in a white dominant culture. The modern critics and writers have primarily focused upon the act of reading and decoding the contextual meaning out of a text. Even if we assume that the author's biographical reservations and personal settings are not directly influential in deciphering the meaning, it doesn't need to imply that we should totally ignore the writer. We, as readers, might be interested in a writer's biographical and social circumstances, and also the zeitgeist.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Toni Morrison enters the new millennium with a rare distinction of being the only woman of African-American origin having eleven novels to her credit and winning maximum number of prestigious awards including the fabulous Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. A plethora of critical works have sprung up to account for the high literary merit of her fictive discourse. A majority of critical opinions holds that she ranks honorably among the great classic litterateurs of the world. As a matter of fact, it was absolutely impossible for the Swedish academy to ignore Toni Morrison's legitimate claim in an age of deconstruction, archeology, genealogy and ethics setting aside all the traditional approaches. While many African Americans were still struggling for expression by the standards of Western norms, Toni Morrison had set it as a goal for herself to question them. Though similar efforts were made by other writers too, they lacked the authority and subtlety of subverting the hegemonic practices of European and American literature. In an age dominated by the racial superiority of Whites, it was an intellectual challenge for Toni Morrison first to launch frontal attack on philosophical theories that legitimized racism, and then the 'mimetic' discourses of African-Americans for appropriating western aestheticism and modernism. How incisive the critique of her counter-attack is evident from the tone and tenor of her work--*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison released the book the same year when her sixth novel *Jazz* started reverberating in the corridors of power--power that springs from knowledge.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931. Both her parents, Ramah and George Wofford, originally belonged to Southern families. Her maternal grandparents had shifted to Lorain via Kentucky where her grandfather worked as a coal miner. Her father had fled from Georgia to Ohio to escape the racial hostility. As a state, Ohio embrace in microcosm, the schizophrenic nature of the Union itself in which the free states of the North and slave states of the South were brought together under one umbrella. The approach of Morrison to see Ohio isn't insignificant to her work. The two major concerns of her fiction depend on her own perception of Ohio: first, the quest for individual advancement by black individuals in a white-dominant country and culture at the loss of their dark parentage; and secondly, the revival of black harmony dependent on, to say in her own words from *Beloved* (1987), 'rememory' of slavery and white America's continual denial of black people. Toni Morrison has left every sound of her childhood name, Chloe Wofford. She had changed her name on the proposal of her companions at Howard University. It could be symbolized as the prototype of her encounter with the Other bringing about her new self.

In 1953, Toni completed her Bachelors in Arts in English and Minors in Classics. Here she got exposed to the First World conventional art, traditional philosophy, and critical literature. Due to her great performance at Howard University, she felt energized and got admitted in Cornell University. There in 1955 she completed her Master in Arts with her thesis on "Suicide in the Works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner." After that she was offered appointment to teach English and Humanities in Texas Southern University in Houston. As a teacher in Harvard University, Toni experienced another unfavorable identity crisis. She met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, who influenced her personality by leaving an ineradicable impression on her life. They could not sustain their relationship for more than six years, but it shaped her life significantly. In spite of having two sons, her confidence and buoyancy seemed impaired due to the absence of Harold Morrison. However, her creativity, fantasy and inspiration helped her transforming this loss into a power which she tried to recapitulate thorough her varied narratives. Her marital relationship broke in 1964 when they had returned from a European tour. Toni Morrison's encounter with European life gave her menacing and weird awareness. She got too much engrossed in secret messages of the profound knowledge that her individuality was troubled with issues of bigger significance. However, the nuptial split was so painful that it left her ingrained in the endless pit of anguish. With the help of creative and fictive writing she could get out from the marsh of sadness.

## FICTIONAL OEUVRE

Luckily she was selected as Editor for L.W. Singer, a division of Random House, Syracuse, New York. With the editing work she started writing her first novel *The Bluest Eye* which was completed in 1970. This created a healing effect and helped her affirm her identity. Once, before her separation, she wrote a story for a writing group. She did not know that would serve as the base for her first novel. Her first novel writing was a very extensive and cumbersome process. She kept on amending her views, since she, being a black woman, started a job which was largely dominated by the White society. She was so conscious that she did not tell her employer and published the book from another press. She changed her name and appeared as a new identity, but

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even suspended her name from the book cover. Her primary concern was the search for self by the black community and being a woman she could express the double subjugation, that of patriarchal culture and the white community. It gave her confidence that although she is black, yet she has the capability to explore her inner self with more finesse. Morrison received "Main selection of Book-of-the-Month-Club" award subsequent to writing her first three novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1978). She was selected as a lecturer at Yale University after the success of *Sula*, and she won National Book Critics Circle award after writing *Song of Solomon*. The American Academy of Arts and Letters named her the distinguished writer of 1978 and then she was appointed by President Carter to the National Councils on the Arts. She got more awards after the publication of her fourth novel *Tar Baby* in 1984.

But it was with the publication of her fifth novel, *Beloved* (1988), that she became widely acclaimed writer of her time by winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Robert F. Kennedy Book Award and the Melcher Book Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association. In 1989, she accepted Robert Goheen Professorship at Princeton University and won the Modern Language Association of America's Commonwealth Award in Literature. In 1990, she was conferred with the Chianti Ruffino Antico Fattore International Award in Literature. In 1992, *Jazz* her sixth novel was published. *Paradise* (1997) her seventh novel, is the first that Morrison wrote after getting Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She was the first black person and only the eighth woman to receive that recognition. She also received Pearl Buck Award and Rhegium Julii Prize for Literature in 1994. In 2000 she was bestowed with National Humanities Medal. Her eighth novel *Love* was penned by her in 2003, while the ninth one *A Mercy* was published in 2008. Her recent fictional oeuvre includes *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015).

Toni Morrison has not only established herself in American and African American literature as a first rate novelist but also as a popular lecturer and first-rate literary and cultural critic. Her first book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), argues that canonical text in American literature are long overdue for an analysis of how they are structured in subtle and not so subtle ways by their antithesis to blackness. This book arose out of the way in which her fiction required her 'to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world'. With the publication of *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and The Construction of Social Reality*, a book of essays she edited in 1992, Morrison offers insightful social commentary on the race and gender politics of one of the nation's most significant moments in recent history. In 1997, Morrison published *Birth of Nationhood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*, ed., with Claudia Brodsky Lacour.

## **PIQUE OF VICTIMIZED IDENTITY & VOYAGE OF SELF ASSERTION**

The work of many African-American writers, and especially the novels of Toni Morrison express black women's wishes and ambitions which are not expressed by traditional folklore like that of the black mother. Toni's fiction persistently concerns with the black, female-headed households where survival, as the German Scholar Konean points out, is dependent upon 'self-inventing.' The novels of Morrison consistently argue that

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the black women's liberation can only be appreciated within the perspective of black culture and community.

Toni Morrison has contributed significantly in transforming the African-American text into a limitless medium of discovery and affirmation. Her characters like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, inhabit a world where inhospitable assumptions obtain the level of invisibility. But Morrison does not provide her people with the option of living underground, in isolation, beyond community. Her work constantly exhibits that self existence can only be established in the common people and in the communistic exposure, and not in the supremacy of culture or in the quest for a distinct personal identity. Her novels document the author's awareness and concern for the historical condition that sparked the national struggle of African people against oppression and exploitation. She has made the invisible quite visible not only in the Afro-American culture but also transcending the racial boundaries of Afro-American culture. Her writings have extensively emanated from surpassing the socio-political, historical and economical restraints of her own peculiar culture. Recurring themes in her fiction are the failure of love, the quest for an authentic identity; and the clash between material and spiritual values, between the belief that the physical world is all there is and the belief that beyond the physical world there exists a spiritual world. Her novels illustrate the growth of the themes as it goes through many transformations, in much the way a good jazz musician finds the hidden melodies within a phrase.

The females in her fiction have been portrayed with submissive consciousness, yet striving for identity of their own. The pique of the victimized identity, the struggle involved in asserting the self and the voyage of the self affirmation is by and large dominant in their psychology. The quest for self is an inspiring and regulating device in Morrison's fiction as is the role of family and community in nurturing or challenging the individual. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Jennifer Uglow (1993) suggested that Morrison's novel "explore in particular the process of growing up black, female and poor. Avoiding generalities, Toni Morrison concentrates on the relation between the pressures of the community, patterns established within families" and the developing sense of Self(22). According to Dorothy H. Lee (1984) in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, Morrison is preoccupied, "with the effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable Self. In treating this subject, she draws recurrently on myth and legend for story pattern and characters, returning repeatedly to the theory of quest . . . The goals her character seeks to achieve are similar in their deepest implications, and yet the degree to which they attain them varies radically because each novel is cast in unique human terms"(56).

In the books of Morrison, the black women always encounter the assumption that all of their experiences are painful, humiliating and are to be comprehended within slavery. She tempers this hard lesson by preserving "the richness of communal life against an outer world that denies its value." The black women characters in her novels are conscious of their alien self and Morrison seeks to repair the alienation of the black Self from its culture and ruptures of culture transmission and continuity through tropes that Morrison calls 'eruptions of funk.' Morrison's tropes of funk include metaphors drawn from past moments of sensual fulfillment as well as the use of lack, deformity and self-mutilation as figures for liberation'. Using these eruptions of funk-- 'the intrusion of the past in the present'--Morrison posits an alternative social world, one in

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which "otherness" no longer functions as an extension of domination as it does when blackness is beheld from ... racist bourgeois society, or when the crippled, blind and deformed are compared to the terrorizing totality of a whole and therefore "perfect" body. Instead, the worlds of otherness that Morrison weaves permit 'a reversal of domination' and transform 'what was once perceived from without' as "other" into the explosive image of a utopian mode'.

Toni Morrison uses each novel as a framework for investigating various solutions to the African women's dilemma. According to Willis, "Morrison writes to awaken her reader's sensitivity, to shake up and disrupt the sensual numbing that accompanies social and psychological alienation" (268). All of her females survive in a culture distinctly black but surrounded by the white world that denies and disregards it. The feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness, rootlessness and isolation grips the individual in their quest for an authentic self in white society. A deep psychological unrest and emotional tension grips the women protagonists as they find themselves trapped in a Kafkaesque situation.

Morrison's novels present before the world the problem of black women and their crimes like murder, rape, incest, necrophilia, child abuse, insanity, terrifying family secrets, and a general sense of life teetering on the edge of dissolution. Her protagonists become the victim of psychological disorders such as extreme anxiety states, despair and pessimism, perception of a loss of Self, of beliefs and values, and of the sense of purpose and attachment. Their behavioral adaptations demonstrate apathy, distrust, aggression, and withdrawal symptoms.

The alienated consciousness of black females remains the epicenter of Morrison's fictional cosmos. Her women characters are always in action. They walk, drive, take buses, fly, always in search of something-- money, happiness, love, themselves. Yet seldom is the object of their quest realized. They may find material success but never happiness. Only when the physical journey mirrors a psychological passage is the course even worthwhile.

Morrison highlights the social and psychological aspects of black women's experiences of alienation. Alienation is not simply because of black woman's separation from her cultural center; rather it is the result of her psychological transition. The condition of the black woman is different in white society. Usually employed as maid and therefore only marginally incorporated as a wage laborer, her alienation was the result of striving to achieve the white bourgeois social model (in which she worked but did not live) which is itself produced by the system of wage labor under capitalism. Black women's consciousness is always affected due to confrontation with fantasy world of Hollywood movies. She works as housemaid in prosperous houses where she lives among white people but is still marginal. The concept of beauty for her is tender white and blond women. At her work place, she even detaches with her real self, from her own kinky hair and decayed tooth. The tragedy of a woman's alienation is as effect on her role as mother. Her emotions split; she showers tenderness and love on her employer's child, and rains violence and disdain on her own.

The first sentence of her Noble speech addressed to the members of the Swedish academy is, "Ladies and Gentleman: Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me" (The Noble Lecture). By this she means that her fiction is the representative of African-American 'social reality' and 'struggle'. In her work the eccentric



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is often made explicable. The struggle to define and create a notion of selfhood in ways which are different from the stereotypical expectations of behavior carried by the larger symbolic order as a whole inevitably involves a process of inner dislocation. The inner Self is distorted due to the influence of European and American culture and the notion of beauty characteristically and ideally white. These prevailing white ideologies have dominated the authentic black self deeply in some of the characters which amount to self loathing. This self disrespect and disgust is more prevalent in those black female characters who are far away from their native communities. The greatest reason for the violence and vindictiveness imposed upon them is that they are different; and this difference of race, hair and color brings self hatred, specifically focused on the body.

## CONCLUSION

Morrison's novels raise a sense of exigency that not individual female character's consciousness is to be realized; rather the focus is on the predicament of entire black women community. What matters is not the emancipation of these individuals, as they are striving to proclaim their identity; but the survival and existence of cultural inheritance, which is somewhat, nay to a great, extent lost. The feminine consciousness in Toni Morrison is realized through the female characters' incessant struggle and quest for their secluded self.

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