

Toni Morrison's Fiction: Challenging Authority

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Abstract: Toni Morrison concerns herself with unheard voices of pain, suffering and betrayal that have always clamored to be heard but have been acknowledged and passed on as if it were an everyday normality. These broken, oppressed and untouchable children of God are a people who have held a central place in the imaginations of power and have been the 'other' in the binaries of civilizations. In this paper my focus is on the manner in which Toni Morrison negotiates the margins, deconstructing the sense of political utopia of the privileged classes and bringing to the forefront the tales of universal woe through myth and memory. I shall be discussing her novels to this effect.

Keywords: Unheard voices of pain; power; margin; White hegemony; racial denial; myth; memory.

Toni Morrison concerns herself with unheard African-American voices of pain, suffering and betrayal that have always clamored to be heard but have been acknowledged and passed on as if it were an everyday normality. These broken, oppressed and untouchable children of God are a people who have held a central place in the imaginations of power and have been the 'other' in the binaries of civilizations. Morrison re-tells the tales of subjugation, racism and sexism and their subsequent impact in numbing and devoicing the victims over centuries. She uses memory and myth in her narration pointing to these people's desperation for survival. She suggests shifts in universal culture and politics resulting from White hegemony and from racial denial. Morrison deconstructs the concept of center ignoring the binaries of white-centric narratives; she recasts the drama of American cultural history between the text and the reader. In this article I shall be focusing on the manner in which Toni Morrison negotiates the margins, deconstructing the sense of hegemony of the privileged classes and bringing to the forefront the backgrounded tales of American cultural history through myth and memory. I shall be discussing her novels to this effect. In an interview on television, sometime before she got the Nobel Prize, Bill Moyers once told her "You write well enough. You could come into the center if you wanted to. You don't have to stay out there on the margins" (Schappell 120). To which Toni Morrison replied, "Yeah, well I'm gonna stay out here on the margin, and let the center look for me" (120). Indeed she is quite vocal about her views regarding marginality, Black people and Whiteness in America. She refuses to privilege White people in her novels. In an interview published by TheAntiIntellect more recently on June 20, 2012, we read that:

Toni Morrison has always taken for granted the centrality of Blackness in her novels. She has refused throughout her writing

career to privilege "Whiteness" in her literary works. . . . She refuses to accept the idea that writing about Black people is not "real writing," and that Black writers must engage with White characters or the White world in order for their writing to be legitimate. She will not privilege White people, nor will she explain things to White readers. (youtube.com)

Morrison in her writing is concerned with the social and personal lives of the African-Americans. She engages with them and is curious about their internal lives and history. She wants to know why the African-Americans live in the way they do. This, in a way, explains the themes of fragmentation, alienation, self and identity that are recurrent in her novels. The centrality of 'Blackness' that she perceives is a reality that needs to be comprehended and elaborately shaped. The characters in her novels are three dimensional and have the "Potential for emotional, psychological and spiritual growth" (Pinson 26). The women she portrays are neither ideal nor saintly. Rather, they are women who are human beings flawed, and in need of empathy and understanding, very much rooted in their race and gender. Hence, Morrison interfuses imagination into her narrative and moves beyond mimetic portrayal of characters into a fantastic world that helps in subverting perceivable reality to allow glimpses into an inner reality. Morrison's mode of narration inverts the elements of the actual world to render them strange and unfamiliar. In her narrative, history is mythified and perceivable reality is problematized to make it more intense than it appears to be. African-American history lives in the memory of its people. Even Du Bois in 1940 has spoken of history and connectedness of the African-Americans with their roots.

In 1940, Du Bois reflected on his relationship with Africa. "Neither my father nor my father's father ever saw Africa or knew its meaning or cared overmuch for it," he wrote. "But the physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. (Prashad 1)

The tragic racial history that is in the background of the African-American people, makes them hesitant in accepting and effecting a social change to better the condition of their lives. Nikki Giovanni is one with both, Du Bois and Morrison, when she says: "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we are living in, change it. And if we can't change it, we change ourselves. We can do something" (Tate 68). Morrison effects this 'change' in various ways in her fiction; bringing about a distinct connection between self, preservation and change. To achieve this, Morrison uses certain structural devices of the fantastic narrative like strangeness, contradictions, contraries, monologues, dreams, anxiety, memory etc. in her fiction. She questions the norms set up by a white-centric patriarchal society. All her novels portray women with independent self definitions, representatives being: the McTeer girls in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula and Eva in *Sula*, Pilate in *The Song of Solomon*, Jadine in *Tar Baby*, Denver in *Beloved*, Violet in *Jazz*, Junior and Christine in *Love*, all the five women living in the convent in Oklahoma in *Paradise*

and, Lina, Sorrow and Florence in *A Mercy*. In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola tries to bring about a change, moulding herself in the mould of the White beauty myth of blue eyes and blonde hair, albeit imaginatively, and fails. She is devastated by trying to confirm to a culture that is not her own. Sula the protagonist of *Sula*, leaves her home town in order to search for a self that is counter to the culture that she was born into. Her return to her hometown is heralded by the death of Robins, which could well mean that it was an indicator that Sula's changed self would bring death and sorrow to her society.

In the subsequent novels Morrison moves away from critiquing the Black people who try to rewrite themselves as Whites into exploring vital issues like connecting with history and African-American roots. Milkman Dead in *The Song of Solomon* wants to reconstruct himself. He seeks the help of his aunt Pilate and tries to redefine himself within his materialistic world. He seeks and tries to connect with his ancestor Solomon, in order to understand and imbibe their compassionate and humanistic ways of life. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine, though a jet-set Parisian model brought up and patronized by a White candy baron, has never disconnected with her culture. Morrison gives an account of her relationship with Son and her sojourn to Eloi, an African-American village in the heart of Florida. She learns to adapt herself to her environment and becomes a self assured progressive woman. Connecting and bonding play vital roles in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise* and *A Mercy*. In *Beloved* Denver tries to escape from the clutches of re-memory and a past that threatens to stifle the life out of her and her mother. Rejecting isolation she connects with the women of her neighbourhood. She seeks their help. They use shamanism peculiar to African culture to exorcise the ghost of Beloved, who was an element from their abominable past. Thus Denver integrates with life without denying the horrific history of slavery, yet rising above it. In *Jazz*, Morrison paints the lives of African-Americans living in urban America with their real problems. While the city offers possibilities it also gives pain. The protagonist Violet, complacent in the love of her husband Joe, had accepted life as it were. Until, his affair with a young girl Dorcas unsettles her life. She does not break, rather changes from a passive woman into a woman of action when the situation so demands. In Morrison's novels change also occurs in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Remaining apparently motionless on the outside, her heroines develop on the 'insides', which is they develop their consciousness as a sphere of freedom. This self knowledge develops even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act. In this context Claudia Tate says that

.... This is not to imply that she is completely circumscribe by her limitations. On the contrary, she learns to exceed former boundaries but only as a direct result of knowing where they lie. In this regard, she teaches her readers a great deal about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies, armed with nothing more than her inte. . . this type of change . . . occurs because the heroine reorganizes , and more importantly respects her inability to alter a situation llect and emotions. (Tate 1983,xxiv)

In recasting themselves within the ambit of racial discrimination and sexual politics, Morrison's women characters redefine their place in American cultural history. The text becomes performative and the reader is exposed to the struggles of these women who form an integral part of American society in their own rights. The narratives help the reader to look at the binaries of White-centric society from a very different perspective. Claudia Tate advocates the significance of rearticulation of the dynamics of the binaries which are mirrored in the heroines of Morrison's novels. Barbara Christian too maintains that the heroines of 1940's Black women literature, such as Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Cleo Judson in Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948) are defeated not only by their social reality but also their "lack of self-knowledge." In contrast, women from 1950s to the present exhibit a significant shift towards self-knowledge or a "sphere of freedom." The woman "constructs her own standards, she manages to transform that 'little life' into so much more despite the limits set on her... [she] emerges neither crushed nor triumphant" (Christian 1985, 176). Morrison's women are constructs who are neither 'crushed nor triumphant'; they in fact negotiate with racism and marginalization. Toni Morrison examines the relationships between races and sexes. She combines myth and history with fantasy with a deep political sensitivity. She transforms individuals into forces and idiosyncrasies, and individual obsession into inevitabilities. Hence, some critics comparing her with D.H. Lawrence have called her the D.H. Lawrence of the Black psyche. Morrison has often been compared to some of the canonical figures of American literature, namely, Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Faulkner. Although, Mark Twain's fiction represents racialized American literature and culture, they are the embodiment of canonical American literature that emphasize its romance, its flights, its individualism, its exceptionalism and its ahistorical and apolitical nature. That is, Twain's novels are representative of the American romance. In her essay, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American presence in American Literature,' Morrison argues that the Afro-American presence in the canonical American Literature though implicit has shaped its choices, its language, its structure and even its meaning. Mark Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has racialized the Afro-American presence, whereas Toni Morrison has recognized both the historical and the cultural importance of placing the American and the African-American in intimate dependence on each other. Her novels *Tar Baby* placed in contemporary times and *A Mercy* placed in the seventeenth century before the formation of America as a nation are a pointer to this. In the nineteenth century Hawthorne, in his novels has spoken of and for the African-Americans. He gives a Euro-centric view of the African-Americans. He suggests that the pain and the legacy of slavery should be forgotten and can be made to vanish in order to have an integrated America. Although, Toni Morrison too wants to have an America that is integrative, she believes that history makes a nation what it is. Her narratives accentuate the different experiences of the Europeans and the African-Americans in the course of building America. Morrison

counters the fact that the African-American experience of slavery, pain, suffering, anxiety, betrayal and trauma should be forgotten, put to rest or be made to vanish. In her novels she has taken cognizance of the unheard voices of pain, suffering and betrayal that have always clamored to be heard but have been acknowledged and passed on as if it were an everyday normality. She says that ignoring this would be the negation of the American experience as a totality. She insists that slavery is as much a part of American history as of African-American history. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison says that "the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act" (46). Enforcing racelessness cannot deny the fact that the African-Americans have been broken, oppressed and treated as untouchable children of God. They are a people who have held a central place in the imaginations of power and have been the 'other' in the binaries of American civilization.

Barbara Christian compares Toni Morrison with Virginia Woolf, one of the most important writers of mainstream literature. In 'Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison', she observes that both Woolf and Morrison rivet their writings on the inner life of their characters and the world within which they find themselves. Even if the two writers belong to two different "cultural cosmologies", in their works we find that, "memory is the central aspect of the inner life, one means by which we interpret the present as well as remember the past Even as the reader is experiencing reality in terms of the characters' inner lives, we are anchored in some time and place" (493). Morrison subverts time and place. She focuses on the inner lives of her characters which necessitates that she defy chronological time and unity of place. She challenges the premises of American utopia and romance. She deconstructs love/desire. Morrison writes about "expanded definitions of love, rooted in a tradition of a people who, from their beginning in this country [America], had been denied the right to express love, and have thus invented their particular strategies to hold on to it. In... [Morrison's] world love is not so much romance as it is primal "risk" and "freedom", incapable of being completely contained" (498). She deconstructs romantic love and portrays in her novels a kind of love which is both a risk and freedom, incapable of being contained. In *Sula* there is a peculiar kind of love between Sula and Nel. It is symbiotic, nurturing as it grows. On the contrary, Sula's love for Ajax which is romantic and carnal destroys her completely and is instrumental in her death. Jadine's love for Son in *Tar Baby* is turbulent and risky but it gives her the ultimate freedom from the cultural/ racial bias that she had been drawn into. *Beloved* exhibits two kinds of mother-daughter love- the one between Sethe and Beloved, that is obsessive and destructive and threatens to consume as it grows; and the other between Sethe and Denver that is regenerative. In the same text the man-woman love between Paul and Sethe has to undergo a test of uncertainty and patience that it finally wins. In *A Mercy* and *Paradise*, Morrison moves away from racial concerns and concerns herself with love and attachment between a group of women from different racial backgrounds. The women in *Paradise* isolate themselves in a convent and find gratification in each

other. In *A Mercy* the women find themselves isolated in the farm of Jakob Vaark, where they form an enduring relationship. Here, Toni Morrison strikes the universal chord. The bond between the women is irrespective of their colour, race or class. The racist and sexist violence they are subjected to is universal. Love becomes the potion that heals and leads them to the path of self-knowledge. Pinson in her review of *Paradise* says that,

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, Morrison argues for the utility of the novel in the late 20th century: “we don't live in places where we can hear the stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children classical mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago”. It seems that she has followed her own advice (26).

Hence, Morrison's narratives offer the readers history, myths and fantastic images that she wants them to read. Talking of *Paradise*, Pinson further observes that Morrison has cast the novel as a postmodern scripture and that she has challenged the most dearly held beliefs and prejudices about society in general. That, she is universal in her approach and not merely racial has been ratified by Morrison herself in an interview with Elissa Schappell. She says,

By trying to alter language, simply to free it up, not to repress it or confine it, but to open it up. Tease it. Blast its racist straightjacket. I wrote a story entitled 'Recitatif', in which there are two little girls in an orphanage, one white and one black. But the reader doesn't know which is white and which is black. I use class codes but no racial codes. (102).

In her novels from *Tar Baby* onwards Morrison uses 'class codes' and not 'race codes' in her attempt to subvert racist straightjackets. By the time Morrison started writing in the 1970's, very few African-American women had got recognition in America. The African-American woman herself was presented as the stereotype mammy in the novels of authors like Francis Harper, Pauline Hopkins and Zora Neale Hurston. None of them had got any acclaim before Gwendolyn Brooks got the Pulitzer Prize in 1951. Therefore, Morrison took up the entire responsibility of depicting a picture of the African-Americans that would problematize their marginalization. Morrison is an intellectual with deep political awareness. In a video interview 'Toni Morrison takes White Supremacy to task', she vocalizes her deep seated concern about racial discrimination. “Few intellectuals have waged a public battle against white supremacy and patriarchy like Toni Morrison. Morrison has both examined and challenged systems of domination throughout her intellectual life. With her novels, essays, and interviews she has taken critical looks at the interlocking systems of race and gender oppression. In this interview she is asked by PBS's Charlie Rose what it is like for her to encounter racism. In true Morrison fashion she turns the question on its head, and places the onus for explaining racism back into the hands of White people. She asks Rose what he thinks of racism, why do Whites hold onto, and what are they going to do about it ending it. She rejects the notion that racism is simply something that Black people must grapple with, insisting, demanding, that White people also grapple with it” (Mar

24, 2012). Morrison clearly states that she does not want to write about White people to get to the centre of canonical American literature. She has always taken for granted the centrality of Blackness in her novels. She has refused throughout her writing career to privilege "Whiteness" in her literary works. She refuses to accept the idea that writing about Black people is not "real writing," and that Black writers must engage with White characters or the White world in order for their writing to be legitimate. She will not privilege White people, nor will she explain things to White readers. In a white supremacist and patriarchal society, non-Whites and women are often required to give up their identity in order to be accepted into the mainstream. Toni Morrison articulates powerfully in a video published on www.youtube.com 'that she refused to give up any ounce of melanin or her gender in order to "make it." She refuses to undergo a literal or metaphorical process of bleaching in order to be accepted into the corridors of power. This is such a necessary statement because so many feel they have to hide their true selves in order to make it in this society' (March 28). In her defiance she deconstructs the concept of the centre and the margin. In fact, the centre comes looking for her to confer the Nobel Prize on her in 1993.

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