



Black Feminism: What Women of Color Went Through in Toni Morrison's Selected Novels

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Abstract

This article examines two of Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* in the lights of black feminism, racism, realism and naturalism. It is an attempt to reflect the powerlessness, inhumanity, and pains that women of color went through. By using a feminist racist and naturalist filter, a descriptive-analytical method of study and by analyzing the situations, the characters and themes, the status of women of color in Literature based on Morrison's selected novels are revealed and represented. Morrison very well describes how different women characters react and respond differently to the injustice and the inhumanity imposed on them through for example the contrasting nature of Sethe in *Beloved* and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*. She depicts the bravery and courage in Sethe, the self-absorbedness in Pauline and the passiveness in Pecola all of which raise powerful questions regarding black-women's self-identity, self-concept, and struggles to achieve freedom as a living being if not a human being: a path which will deepen our understanding of women issues in general. The researcher believes that a womanish and racist study of the selected novels would contribute to broaden our views of humanity. The researcher selected women of color because she thinks the sorrows of black women, and the pains and toils they went through have always been deeper than those of the white ones.

Keywords: Feminism, Naturalism, Racism, Postmodernism, Sexism, Scapegoat

1. Introduction

"As a woman, I have no country; as a woman, my country is the world." (Virginia Woolf, 1938). Most of the world's great literature had been written by men. Sappho, Austen, the Brontes and Emily Dickenson apart, it was really difficult to think women really had it in them to write at the highest level. Some men might be sympathetic to women's issues but only women themselves knew what they felt and wanted. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says "The most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend women's concrete situation."

During the Victorian era, women were supposed to be angels at home; they were supposed to be passive and delicate creatures. Women were expected to cook, to raise the children and to do the housework. During this time, it was not important whether women were poor or rich, from Europe or America, beautiful or ugly because they all suffered similar pains. During this period, novelists such as Thomas Hardy and Charlotte Bronte influenced the age by their woman-centered novels. They said the unsaid, noticed the unnoticed, spoke the unspoken and tried to express and verbalize the pent-up emotions of countless women who were unable to put their thoughts and feelings into words. "We have to know where women are and why women have to write novels, the story of their own domesticity and the story of their own seclusion within the home and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that." (Juliet Mitchel, 1988).

Traditionally, literature used to reflect the patriarchal ideology and this fact proves that women were considered as inferior through history. According to the accepted patriarchal ideology of the past, the first and foremost place for women is the home. However, a woman's place is in the world not at home. Being born a girl and brought up in a male-based world, the researcher has always been keen and eager to know more about girlhood, women and issues related to them. Today, ever increasing space is given to writings by and about women; and, the researcher thinks more attention needs to be taken to 'female' especially 'women of color'.

A woman is the product of her society and the future of a society which allows racial discrimination, and a society in which the home is the place for women, would never be promising. If today, the black women have won their freedom and independence, and some are trying to win it, it is because we have come a long way. It is because we have been carried a long part of that way by efforts of many women who came before us, who refused to give up, who paved the way for us and did not let the white male based society to silence or muzzle them, who did not submit to injustice. In 1970, Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Women were marginalized in the literature of the past; so, women novelists like Toni Morrison began to change the ways of dealing with literature. 'Woman of color' is one of the main concerns of Toni Morrison's novels. Toni Morrison as an African- American author, very well shows the struggles and attempts of ambitious black women characters who want to free themselves from the clutches of injustice and the white male dominated society. According to Toni Morrison, in traditional black-skinned families, there is no talk of

identity for the simple reason that identity is fixed. In her novels, we see how a black woman becomes aware of her oppression, her subservient role at home, in society and the way she reacts. Her novels are an attempt to make women understand their crucial roles as active agents in the lives of their daughters and the way daughters construct their understandings of race, of color and last but not least of themselves.

Feminism comes from the Latin word 'femina' which means woman or anything related to women. Feminism refers to women or issues related them. It is a critique of the patriarchy. Feminists are after equality of men and women, women's rights and their improvement. They believe that women must have the same opportunities as men. It is in fact difficult to define feminism accurately because there is no one single definition for feminism but generally speaking feminism is a critique of the patriarchy. Feminists seek to equate men and women and make this planet a world of gender equality and of nonsexist language. Many women consider the Women's Movement of 1960s as the origin of feminism but in fact its origin goes back to earlier times. However, it is generally accepted that after the women's Movement of 1960s, the world began to feminize.

According to Beauvoir (1908-86), man has defined himself as the *self* and woman as the *other*; and, because other is a threat to *self*, man derogated and subordinated *other*. In her book The Second Sex, she discusses that a woman is regarded as the other and she complains that man is the dominant subject who represents humanity, for example we have 'mankind'. According to her, women are taught to be passive.

Betty Friedan (1963), believed that women live in a modern world but they are still treated as Victorians. "Women's anatomy determines their destiny." Women are victims of a false belief because they identify themselves either through their husbands or their children. In her book, Feminine Mystique, she states "I think women had to suffer this crisis of identity which began a hundred years ago, and have to suffer it still today to become fully human."

As Luce Irigaray (1937), a postmodernist feminist, who was Lacan's student demonstrated, sexual difference and mother-daughter relationship need to be focused. She uses mimesis as a tool and weapon against the patriarchal system. Like Lacan, she believes that biology is very much influenced by culture. In her book, I Love To You, Irigaray presents a kind of communication that does not consider one as the object of the subject; and, that is why she named her book, I Love To You and not I Love You.

Showalter (1998), the American feminist literary critic (who in A Literature of Their Own provides a framework for understanding British Women's literary criticism), feminism is divided into three stages: Feminine before 1880, Feminist between 1880-1920, Female since 1920. She states that "Feminist criticism should focus on women's access to language because language is enough to express women's consciousness but the problem is that women do not have access to all sources of language; so, they are forced to be silenced."

According to Leslie Rebecca Bloom (1998), Because of women's long history of material marginalization, patriarchal oppression, colonization, physical abuse, and the psychological damage of being demeaned by the pervasive hierarchical structuring of the sexual differences of male/female, women have internalized many negative and conflicted ideas of what it means to be a woman.

2. Purpose and Rationale

In *Women of Color and Feminist Criticism*, Hedrik and King state "African-American women writers give passion and a desire for survival. It is a literature that reconstitutes human value and gives back to Black women that which was stolen, denied, ignored and deemed worthless-the truth of their woman hood and the peace found only in knowing and loving – having a passion for – what that means. Black women writers align their work closely with the realities of African-American women's lives by exposing the barriers thrown up by patriarchy and racism to self-knowledge, self-love and individual wholeness. They investigate the effects such barriers impose upon the development of characters like Pocola in The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison."

Feminist writers of 1960s and 1970s have attacked the mother who subordinates the daughter because it is in the hands of the mother to make or mar the personality of the daughter. The mother is the source of identification for the children and the children are careful enough to see how their mother identifies herself. A mother is a role-model for her daughter. In her novels, Morrison throws lights on the status of women of color, and how factors such as race, culture, beauty standards and family determine the status of women in a society. She very well addresses the proverb "all people are equal but some people are more equal." The researcher is going to examine how women in the selected novels of Morrison define themselves. Morrison focuses on the powerlessness and defenselessness of her characters who outdo themselves for survival from the misbehavior and mistreatments imposed on them. The following questions are going to be addressed:

1. How do women in Toni Morrison's novels identify themselves? In other words, how do women recognize themselves? What makes a woman what she is? Is a black woman born with her identity? Does she have any self-identity or self-concept at all?
2. How do the selected novels represent black women's toils, pains, and struggles?
3. How do these works show the activeness and the passiveness of women?
4. In a white dominated and male-based society, what does it mean to be black, a child and above all a woman?
5. How do these works, deepen our understanding of women issues, humanity and equality?

3. Discussion

“Feminist methodology promises a more interpersonal relationship between researchers and those whose lives are the focus of research. Feminist methodology seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched” (Leslie Rebecca Bloom, 1998).

Toni Morrison sheds lights on the unspoken truth of inhumanity of humans to each other. Of course, in order to understand Morrison’s novels, it is important to have enough knowledge about American history and its culture. Morrison says: “In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.” The novel The Bluest Eye was written during the 1960s when racism was common in American society and according to the values and beauty standards of the society beauty meant to be white and to have blond hair or blue eyes. In this novel, the central character hates her appearance and she thinks that others hate her because of her blackness. Unfortunately, her mother is the source of the same belief which was transferred to the daughter, Pocola. In the novel, Mrs. Breedlove says:

“... When I had the second one, a girl, (Pocola), I remember I’d said I’d love it, no matter what it looked like... But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair but Lord she was ugly.”

So, the theme of the novel is about the way we see ourselves and the way we are seen by others. The characters believe that blackness means ugliness. Even Maureen, Pocola’s class mate at school, thinks that since her skin is lighter brown, she is superior to other black girls and in this way she shows her racist thoughts. Maureen shouts at the girls:

“I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly.”

Maureen called the other black girls of the community “black” as if it is an insult or a crime. Morrison’s selected novels, Beloved and The Bluest Eye, are eclecticism of Feminism, Naturalism and Racism. Sethe, in Beloved, and Claudia in The Bluest Eye, are brave enough to make decisions. Their characters are in contrast with Pocola’s mother in The Bluest Eye. So Morrison very well depicts how female black characters respond and react differently to injustice and inhumanity of their environment. On one hand we have Sethe who fights back the challenges and on the other we have Pauline (Pocola’s mother) who conforms to an imposed ideal of beauty standards, racism and injustice. She sees herself through the eyes of white people. Claudia (Pocola’s friend) and her sister are satisfied and happy with their color of skin, blackness. They have physical confidence. Claudia says: “We felt comfortable in our skins.” Claudia hates not light-skinned Maureen but the *thing* that makes her beautiful. It is the white beauty standards that make light-skinned Maureen beautiful. Beauty is in fact something we learn not something we are born with. Pecola has learned to hate herself and to internalize her blackness as her ugliness. The poor child has learned and developed this negative self-concept from her own mother. Pecola and her mother remain passive throughout the story. Pecola may be too young to resort to her own sense of logic; so, naturally, she looks up to her mother as a role- model. Here, we very well see a mother’s crucial role to shape or shatter the mentality of her own daughter. Pecola may be made passive and ruined by the society and the environment but she is mostly destroyed by her own parents. When Pecola’s mother speaks to Pecola and her friends, her voice is like “rotten pieces of apple” but when she speaks to the white girl her voice is like honey. So, messages and confirmations of white superiority do not come from the society only; Pecola’s own mother is the main source of passiveness, isolation, depression and misconception.

Pauline defines strength, beauty and youth only in the terms she has learned from films. Ironically, the white movie star women are also exploited and reduced to the condition of objects, but, the black women in the novel do not perceive this reduction. A self-absorbed mother who neglects her motherly duties and an alcoholic father who rapes her own daughter twice are enough to make Pecola what she becomes at the end of the novel, mad. Morrison tries to show us elements of Naturalism in her novels i.e. to show life in its ugliest form and to show characters helpless and powerless to reach survival. Pocola is mostly a victim of her own family (naturalism). One of the central themes of the novels is pain: the pain of racism, sexism, loss, the pain of being treated as a subhuman, and the pain of loving one’s self and color. At the end of the novel we have cosmic irony because the novel ends tragically with Pecola going mad. Pecola is in fact a scapegoat i.e. a person who is unjustly made to bear the blame for others. For example Geraldin’s hatred of dirt is related to her hatred of niggers and it is a kind of self-hatred. She does not allow her son to play with lower-class niggers (The word originated by the mid-20th century, particularly in the United States; it suggested that its target is extremely unsophisticated. Historically, *nigger* is controversial in literature because of its usage as both a racist insult and a common noun) and scapegoats black children and calls Pecola a “nasty little black bitch”.

Mostly, through sale, slaves were separated from each other. Sethe and other slaves were mistreated and dehumanized by their owner, Schoolteacher who stole the milk of the pregnant Sethe and whipped her on the back. Sethe’s own mother was not able to breastfeed her so Sethe felt fortunate that she could breastfeed her own children; but, they took the milk away. Sethe says: “...they took it. Milk that belonged to my baby... I know what it was like to be without milk that belongs to you.” Sethe was behaved like a female animal. But she was brave enough to escape from the brutality. Sethe did not accept the cruelty imposed on her. Characters like Sethe and Claudia break the forced silence by deciding to love themselves. Morrison’s characters are abused both mentally and physically. Sethe did not want her children to experience the pains of slavery she herself went through. Unlike Pauline in The Bluest Eye, She loved her children and cared about them. Pauline loved the white baby girl more than her own children. She had no identity of her own because she just blindly accepted the fixed identity that the white society imposed on her. On the other hand, Sethe figured that death was better than slavery, that her children would be better off with Jesus. She uses her own sense of logic and decides to kill her children out of pure love and protection. Morrison responds to this reaction of Sethe: “That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them

sullied. She would not see them hurt. She would rather kill them, have them die.” The worst part of slavery is not physical death but psychic death. Sethe kills her daughter to save her from psychic death: “If I hadn’t killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her.” As a mother Sethe is so protective and loving towards her children but Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* is totally forgetful of not only herself but her children. When Pecola tells her about being abused by Cholly, she disbelieves her and beats her. So Pecola is the embodiment of powerlessness because as a black female child she is totally defenseless. She has not recognized herself at all and her mother identifies herself with whiteness. Through her writing, Toni Morrison wants to ascertain that we are all individuals. Color of skin and one’s biology should not be one’s identity. There are elements of **naturalism** (an extreme form of realism is called naturalism which depicts life in its hardest and ugliest situation. In a naturalistic novel, we see that the world is always against us so we have cosmic irony. This is because no matter how hard we try; we cannot avoid our fate. Life is a trap in naturalism because the characters cannot change the determinism i.e. the tragic fate. Their key word in naturalism is fate. No matter how hard one tries, she or he is always the loser), **feminism**, **sexism** (The unfair mistreatment of somebody because of their gender), **realism** (It is a depiction of reality and facts of life in works of art and literature. Realism emerged in nineteenth century when we had the impact of scientific thinking. It is usually about something sad such as social disorder, poverty, unemployment, etc. The key word in realism is money. Realism represents life exactly as it is. Realists want a truthful representation of life in literature of reality. So in literature of reality, reality has to be seen “as it is”. Thus, objectivity and observation are important features of a realistic novel as they are in science), **racism** (racism refers to beliefs, practices or political systems that consider different races to be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other. It also holds that members of different races should be treated differently. So racists believe that people should be treated according to their racial categorization. So it is a form of discrimination. In history, racism was dominant in America in nineteenth century) in her novels, the eclecticism of which makes them **postmodern** (postmodernism is a style or a movement in literature which emerged in the late twentieth century and it is defined in terms of multiplicity and eclecticism because it does not follow one style or a set of fixed ideas. Post modernism questions all absolute values that are set to be true for all people at all times and instead it focuses on an individual and what is true according to him/her. In postmodernism, we have a mixture of features from both tradition and modernism.

Beloved symbolizes the emotional, and spiritual devastation of slavery; a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves even in freedom. Sethe, seems to be alienated from herself and filled with self-loathing. Thus, she sees the best part of herself as her children. Yet her children also have unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with *Beloved*’s, and *Beloved* feels herself actually beginning to physically disintegrate. Slavery has also limited Baby Suggs’s self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the opportunity to be a true wife, sister, daughter, or loving mother. As a result of their inability to believe in their own existences, both Baby Suggs and Paul D become depressed and tired. Baby Suggs’s fatigue is spiritual, while Paul D’s is emotional. Sethe fears that she will end her days in madness. Sethe’s act of infanticide illuminates the perverse forces of slavery: under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them and thus protecting them from the more gradual death of slavery. Rather than surrender her children to a life of dehumanizing slavery, Sethe escapes with them to and tries to kill them. Only the third child dies, her throat having been cut by Sethe. *Beloved* does tell the tales of many slaves. It tells of whippings, rape, hard work, and escape. But, while portraying this historical story of enslavement and black culture, Morrison also tells the personal tales of a few very strong female slaves. Morrison’s novel focuses mainly on the female characters: Sethe, Baby Suggs, *Beloved*, and their relationships. If one defines feminism, as “a major movement in western thinking since the 1960s, which puts particular emphasis upon the importance of women’s experiences”, *Beloved* can be seen as a feminist novel. Where slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity. Morrison writes history with the voices of black women historically denied and *Beloved* recuperates a history that had been lost.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the intention was to examine the feminist features of Toni Morrison’s selected novels to explore the way in which she depicts woman through the approach of black feminism. This paper demonstrates the manifestations of a woman as an individual or as a member of community. Morrison describes black women in specific social and cultural contexts and she makes overt the manner in which black women’s oppression is maintained. Morrison’s selected novels reflect how gender determines destiny especially if one is not only a woman but also colored. This is because black women have to be exposed to the racist behaviors of the white society. So, Morrison very well portrays the bitter experiences of colored women in her novel and in this way, deepens our understanding of their lives. The novels reveal how the conditions of enslavement in the external world, has deep negative influences in the individuals’ internal world. Even if one is finally freed from the bond and ties of the external world, the self will be trapped in an inner world that prevents freedom. As Sethe says: “Freeing yourself was one thing and claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). So the selected novels show that one’s own subjectivity cannot be achieved in the social environment as well as the effects of growing up as a black woman in such a system. A black woman has no self because the society denies it. Through the selected novels, it is realized that it is everyone’s fundamental need to be recognized and affirmed as a human subject; and, if this need is denied, this need can take a destructive ruinous form in the inner world.

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