



Racial discrimination and women in Toni Morrison's novels

Dr. Ramaiah G¹, E Kalyani²

¹ M.A (PUB-ADMN), B. Ed, M. Phil, Ph. D, M.A. (English) Kakatiya, University, Warangal, Telangana, State, India

² M. Sc, B.Ed. M.A (English) Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana, State, India

Abstract

This paper deals with the complexity of Racism and women in the novels of Toni Morrison. For this purpose we have taken a critical study of two novels of Toni Morrison. Some of the main issues are taken in *The Bluest Eye*. In this novel we have shown that the author's main concern is not racism but internal racism. It deals with the habits of the blacks which lie in a slavish imitation of the white system of values. What pains her mind most is that almost all the blacks do not behave independently but they act under false inspiration of the white system of values. The main question before the novelist is whether the blacks will wake up to the reality of the situation. Liberation from the white mandate is viewed as the only solution for the future of the black race. *The Bluest Eye* projects two moments which obviously proceed in two contradictory directions. One pattern is concerned with the over valuation of the white mandate which is followed by Pecola and Pauline, and the other is concerned with the devaluation of the white mandate which is followed by Claudia. Claudia is author's model how other blacks should behave. In *Sula* grounds are carefully built in order to lay emphasis upon the character of Sula, whose intention is to liberate the first world peopled by many characters from slavish adherence to the tradition of the white race. For Sula denial of freedom is denial of life. So long as this situation prevails there is no living for her in actual sense. The people of Medallion who lag behind Sula are not in a position to keep pace with the thinking of Sula. In fact, Sula can be treated as a mouthpiece of the novelist. It is only a self-projection of the novelist in an artistic form. If one understands Sula in depth, one understands the various shades and nuances of the novel. Sula is a key to unlock the riddle of the entire novel.

Keywords: racial discrimination, women, internal racism, medallion etc

Introduction

The respect for black literature has become a slowly emerging phenomenon. Slavery or trade in Human Beings dates and pre-historic times or ancient civilizations used slaves. In the past Africans were sent as slaves across the Sahara to be traded in the Mediterranean by Phoenicians while Greco-Roman traders in the red sea and beyond traded slaves to East-Africa, to Egypt and the middle east. Throughout the ensuing three centuries European nations vied and fought for the control of the lucrative trade of supplying slaves to the labour intensive plantations in the west African islands of Sao Tome and principle; the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in South America; the Carribean; and the southern colonies of North-America following the development of the plantation system there-too from the second half of the 17th century and later in the second half of the 18th century the slave trade reached its peak. As a consequence, the blacks were treated as mere tools for their work and hence they were reduced to sub human status. The blacks were living human-beings but they were treated as inanimate entities by the whites. It is motivating spirit which has led many writers to the trace the history of black-women's writing. Both William Faulker and Toni Morrison are credited with evolving a language peculiar to the blacks in America.

A critical study of two novels of Toni Morrison is undertaken in the thesis. The objective is to bring out the possible shades and nuances which Toni Morrison examines in her critical review of the tragic predicament of the black race. The main question before the novelist is whether the blacks will wake up to the

reality of the situation. All the resources of the novelist in gathering the energies in writing these novels come from seeing the degrading of the blacks by the whites. No one should ill-treat anyone. She has felt the necessity to come out with a graphic account of what is happening among the blacks and she also launches into a question of analysing whether what is happening among the blacks is right or not. The life of the blacks is the subject matter of the theme of Toni Morrison's novels. There is no joy and calmness in their life on account of the racial discrimination created by the whites. Under these circumstances their life becomes very complex. The desire to live a full-fledged life has become impossible for the blacks. Under the domination of the whites who refuse to give full freedom to them, the word 'complexity' is used only to denote the failure and struggle of the blacks to have a fulfilling experience. It is this difficulty of living with an attitude of fulfilment which is very closely analysed in the critical review of the novels. Therefore, the three critical terms womanism, racism and their complexity form a kind of running commentary on the tragic life of the blacks.

The first novel, *The Bluest Eye* deals with the pathetic story of a simple black girl Pecola who endeavours to be as good-looking as the whites in her wish to have bluest eyes. The intensity of grief in Pecola makes her depressingly a tragic girl and a sad woman as she feels that her complexion does not present a close resemblance to the white girl or the white woman. The woman in her being is shaken up by her intense consciousness or awareness of her own ugliness which is born out of a certain inferiority

complex. The inability of a girl character like Pecola in her attempt at feeling being equal to a black in terms of colour and beauty is a particular portrayal of the tragic state of an African woman. Therefore, the tragedy of Pecola is the tragedy of a typical African woman whose average perception of life does not liberate the woman from the plight. In a sense, the entire novel is a plea for exploring the complexity of African womanism. Each woman character is typically a complex figure. Both Claudia and Pecola pass through the stage of girlhood. One is timid and submissive but the other is very courageously rebellious. They undergo two totally different experiences. The coinage of the term African Womanism is helpful in explaining the intense psychological sensibility of Pecola and Claudia. Pecola is a typical embodiment of an African woman showing a kind of complete submission to the tragic plight of life. But Claudia's womanhood is expressed in terms of resistance and fight against the white establishment. All the life energies of the little girl Pecola are spent along the line of acquiring the bluest eye to be good looking as the whites. It is an impossible task but what are unattainable remains to be a main source of attraction for Pecola. While Pecola is a victim of the white system of values, Claudia is shown by the novelist as a strong denouncer of the same system of values imitated by the blacks.

The second novel *Sula* is a multi-faceted novel. It is, first of all, a story of the friendship of two black women (Sula and Nel). The novel *Sula* is a telling example of the novelist's fundamental attitude which gets entangled in her view of an ideal black woman. Again, the two basic concepts, race and gender operate with equal force in this novel. A careful reading of the novel leads to the conclusion that there are two views hidden in the novel portraying a conflict between the Medallion black community unquestioningly following the white pattern of life and a character like Sula openly challenging such an act of slavish imitation of an unfamiliar pattern of life which is not at all related to the black race. The novelist brings with great vitality and life the attitude of the white race exploiting the black race. The pity is that no black is alive to this tragic plight of exploitation of the whites except Sula. The novel *Sula* contains a prelude which gives an excellent criticism of Toni Morrison in commenting on the atrocity of the white race. The nigger episode is a clear demonstration of the basic character of white race which lies in the victimisation of the whites except Sula.

The Bluest Eye: Black Segregation and Imitation

The position of Toni Morrison as a novelist is unique. She is deeply concerned with the welfare of the blacks but she does not spare any efforts or pains to criticise the behavioural shortcomings and limitations of the blacks. If she criticises the blacks mercilessly, it is because she loves them really. It is from this standpoint that her portrayal of character and incident must be analysed. The most important function of the novelist is to indicate the peculiar psychological frame of the blacks. Roughly four or five characters are placed in simultaneous juxtaposition with each other. In fact one can call such a portrayal an excellent character gallery. What these characters do to each other is what primarily matters to the novelist. A pronounced attitude is seen in the blacks who distinguish themselves from the other blacks on the basis of their acceptance of the white paradigm of values. Consequently, such characters look down upon other black characters claiming superiority over them exclusively on the

ground of an imitation of a white mandate. There is little realisation in them to know whether they are right in adopting an alien standard to condemn and turn down their own brethren. A marvellous game of trick is played by the novelist in creating situations where the blacks are critical of the blacks.

Toni Morrison shows her brilliance in indicating to the black readers the white frame of cultural reference, which according to her is embodied in the "Dick Jane Mythology". The unwillingness of parents to attend to a child who loves to play is something which looks very peculiar. A surface reading of the Dick Jane Reader may apparently seem to capture the spirit of family togetherness and cohesiveness. But what Toni Morrison wants is a critical reading of the Dick-Jane reader. There is a reference to a dog which shows the white man's attraction which is nothing but a symbol for social sophistication. It can be even said that the mythology contains a concealed allegory. The parents turning away from the child may be symbolic of the whites turning a blind eye to the actual welfare of the blacks. Allegorically, in the Dick Jane episode the child is apparently alienated from the parents who are not satisfying the desire of the child to play. This description of alienation remains as an undercurrent in the description of the episode but this Dick Jane Reader is projected by the whites to all including the blacks as an ideal way of life to be followed. Toni Morrison employs a different kind of deconstructive reading to bring out the hidden implications of what the whites think about the blacks and how they should organise their life in a servile manner. The mythology is very simple but Toni Morrison is very clever in her analysis because what the mythology meant to the white is one thing and what it meant to the black is another thing. It indicates clearly an organised behaviour pattern laid down by the whites which should be followed by the blacks and the rest of the race. The novelist thinks very deeply about the Dick-Jane mythology and she arrives at a conclusion that it is no longer a term of reference for the blacks as they have their culture of their own, which, if they realise, can furnish an equally enduring pattern of life for them. The mythology by itself does not belittle any human conduct. What it shows is a regulated behaviour pattern. The episode according to Toni Morrison contains a concealed strategy to keep the blacks in a state of permanent intellectual, mental and physical slavery. This is a truth to be deciphered by a kind of unconventional and critical reading. Therefore, Toni Morrison says that the same regulated behaviour pattern need not be followed by the blacks, however wonderful and excellent the Dick-Jane mythology might be.

The attempt is made by Toni Morrison in the novel "The Blue eye" to demonstrate how Pecola the heroine of the novel yields herself to become a victim of the Dick Jane Mythology. The opening pages of the novel subscribe to a telling comment on the behaviour pattern of the whites. Pecola becomes a problem to herself because she wants her life to be in tune with the white standards of beauty and dignity.

The novel is cast in the form of a drama where two character Pecola and Claudia move in two opposite directions. The main mission of the novelist is to build up a picture where Claudia acts as a total antithesis to Pecola. The programme of Claudia is to resist whatever the whites lay down as the values of the blacks. Pecola is shown as a passive victim following the white cultural value system while Claudia is projected as an active fighter challenging the very concept of the whites.

The experience of cultural discrimination on the basis of colour is the outcome of a long established past. This condition of discrimination is compared to unchangeable and inert matter. Toni Morrison through Claudia hints at the fact that this condition of cultural discrimination has come to stay fixed like non-moving physical matter or stone. The word fixity implies metaphorically the element of unchanged ability in a traditionally established situation where racial discrimination has become an unavoidable fact. But Toni Morrison is of the view that human mind is gifted with the power of creativity to melt the fixity found in the existing cultural order by radically reviewing and altering it. It is certainly a very remarkable insight on the part of Toni Morrison to create a character like Claudia and put forth an existentially meaningful passage in her mouth. Many black characters like Cholly Breedlove, Pauline and Pecola have no independence of judgment and originality of vision. The greatest tragic error is that they humiliate themselves in an unwarranted manner. The humiliation is a self-created psycho-neurosis from which the blacks suffer.

The phenomenon called psycho-neurosis is easily applicable to characters like Pecola and Pauline. What is meant by psycho-neurosis is the failure to face reality. So long as one follows a mirror image of someone else's one is not true to oneself. The actual problem is that the black characters like Pecola and Pauline have no faith in themselves and in their own choices of life. What comes to them is what they receive from outside. Actually what comes from outside is the reflection of the white mirror. The white mirror for a black becomes a mandate to them. It implies that the white mandate should be followed without any questioning. It is this unquestioning acceptance in the life of Pecola and Pauline that the novelist points out as a tragic event. Therefore this psycho-neurosis is the condition of hopelessness which is partly self-created and mostly imposed upon the blacks by the whites. The pre-established view is that what is aesthetically pleasing is what deserves the status of love. This is the image from which the black characters like Pecola and Pauline are not able to get rid of themselves. The white mandate according to the novelist is fraught with sinister consequences. There are obvious references in the novel which are put through Pecola, Pauline, Geraldine, Junior and Maureen Peal that the white mandate is the model. Only a very shrewd and formidably forward looking character is created by the novelist in order to devalue the white mandate.

Racism is a big problem. But internal racism is even a bigger problem. The main reason is that the external racism is blindly accepted by the black insiders without little realising that the blacks are not alive to the real issues (the whites have suppressed the blacks for centuries and that the blacks must be free from this slavery). What the whites have done to the blacks is different from what some of the blacks have done to their own blacks. This is a shameful internal racial situation which is projected in some other incident also. The most peculiar thing is that Maureen seems to be much more beautiful than other characters. This is a pride bred by her adherence to white standards. The actual truth is that the white characters will never appreciate a black character like Maureen. What happens when a light-skinned black character is brought into juxtaposition with another black character, a new psychology is in operation (light - skinned blacks believing in their superiority over the dark - skinned blacks):

That they themselves were black or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth.

***Sula*: Foundation of Black Conservatism**

Sula is one of the most challenging novels of complexity which has been deliberately created by Toni Morrison. The main reason for such a bold trend is that in this novel there are three issues which get mixed up. The novelist has her own order of priorities in these issues but lays her hand only on two. The three issues which get mixed up and simultaneously juxtaposed are Race, Gender and Class, and Tradition.

The novelist has clearly stated that her primary interest is in the first two issues. Therefore, for the novelist, the black community and the black women with their problems seem to occupy paramount importance. The message of the novel is that the black community must be free and the black women must come out of the shackles of life. It is worthwhile to know what the problems are in complicating these issues. The problems are not themselves very complicated as one can easily perceive the nature of the problem. The entire black community works in total subordination to the white race. The Bottom hill in the valley land of Medallion represents the pain and problem of the black community. They suffer because they work under the white masters. This suffering is related to the basic problem of their livelihood. However, the novelist is not interested in their economic problem chiefly. She takes pains in studying the behaviour of the black community and especially the mental makeup of black women, several varieties of complicated psychology are found among women. The novelist is in search of an ideal black woman because basically her stance as an artist is in the new tradition of feminist parlance. The question who is an ideal black woman and who is not is certainly answered. This dialectical process sets the whole theme of the novel. The condition of the black community in the Bottom hill of the city of Medallion is thoroughly analysed in the following lines:

"See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile." "But it's high up in the hills," said the slave.

"High up from us," said the master, "but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven – best land there is."

The novel starts with a nigger joke. It is not a joke in the ordinary sense. But it is a piece of irony and sarcasm. The Bottomland in the hill was the place where Negroes lived. Down the hill in the valley, the whites live who treated the blacks as their slaves and inferiors as it was part of the white man's mental consciousness to look down upon the blacks. Even when the Negroes lived in the hills up above the valley where whites lived, peculiarly running contrary to the logic of geographical location, the whites, branded the black habitation of the hill as bottom. In spatial and physical dimensions the white man's description of hill land as Bottom is untrue because the hill land is high and the bottom land is low and deliberately the ideas of high and low are put upside down in order to display and demonstrate before the blacks the racially held white superiority. Even when the Negroes lived on a high hill they called it bottom only to look down upon the blacks. Bottom in the vocabulary of the white is a sign of lowness. In geographical sense between high and bottom high is always regarded as high and bottom always as low.

A few more details can be cited to describe the behaviour pattern of the black community. One such detail is the declaration of National Suicide Day by Shadrackssss, a retired run away soldier from the war.

A critical remark about this incident is made by Carmean who is of the opinion that National Suicide Day serves as an artistic device for finding an objective correlative for the inner fears of the blacks in facing death either in the war or on the tunnel. "Thus National Suicide Day, Shadrack's means of imposing order over fear, not death, becomes the structure which eventually assumes its own independent importance".

The study of the behaviour of the black community is a race study. But now the focus of the artist is shifted on to the gender. Toni Morrison creates in the minds of blacks the urge to envision a new form of life. An average black is not prepared for this new vision because the usual thinking is that such a thing is impossible and there is no use of day dreaming about it as he is content to lead his normal humdrum routine life. Mostly, the men folk in the black community are interested in their own life and their time is spent in indiscriminate drinking and womanising. Such a mode of life is conceived as a life of freedom by the blacks. There are many instances which can be taken from the novel to prove the validity of this argument. Boy Boy, husband of Eva leads a life of his own by abandoning her, but Eva is not a moral rake. She kills her son Plum advancing the argument that she is not in agreement with her son's way of living which is not up to her dignified moral expectation. For her, the racial problem does not arise. Her daughter Hannah sleeps with all kinds of men and spends her time in such wild amusements. Sula is to follow the archetype of her mother in sleeping with all kinds of men. Race, gender, class and tradition are the immediate areas of attention for the novelist. In a sense, the novel is a graphic description of the actual life conditions of the black community. Bottom of Medallion is not simply a place. It represents a character and a consciousness. The so-called inanimate place cannot be accepted as inanimate as long as it propagates the values of life. Thus it becomes a living character

In fact, Sula can be treated as a mouthpiece of the novelist. It is only a self-projection of the novelist in an artistic form. If one understands Sula in depth, one understands the various shades and nuances of the novel. Sula is the key to unlock the riddle of the entire novel.

Grounds are very carefully built up by the novelist in order to lay emphasis upon the character of Sula whose intention is to liberate the first world peopled by many characters from slavish adherence to the tradition of the white race. Therefore, there is a constant friction and in fact a head-on-collision between many characters and Sula herself. Sula is fighting a lone battle and therefore the strategy and responsibility of Toni Morrison as a novelist assumes greater importance. Structurally, the novel achieves a victory in the depiction of Sula as a character of disorder, indiscipline, chaos, lawlessness and anarchy. The greatest fascination for the novelist in the character of Sula lies in these peculiar characteristics which are condemned by the world peopled by many characters. There is a total breakdown of communication between Sula and other characters excluding Nel.

Conclusion

The main plan of the paper lies in showing the agony of the blacks who live in a state of emotional unfulfilment. The reason is

largely traceable to the conditions of life which are determined by the whites who use the blacks for their convenience and welfare. It is this story of the blacks who live in subordination to the whites which is discussed in terms of race, class and gender. The word *Complexity* carries the inner implications of the social and psychological struggle which the blacks experience. Their life is not so simple as they desire it to be. It has become tremendously complex as there is no possibility for a life of joy and vitality. The main theme of the novels of Toni Morrison is concerned with the destiny of the black race. A careful selection of the two novels indicating the problems arising in the life of the black race has been made. The objective of such an endeavour is only to highlight some basic issues connected with the psychology and the sociology of the blacks. Anyway, the black cultural sociology is yet to evolve into a new scheme. Till it sees the light of the day the blacks cannot feel proud to achieve an emancipation. Their complacency, a kind of smug self-satisfaction with the existing conditions of life, some enduring the whites, some imitating the whites, some claiming and feeling superior to the blacks in spite of their being the blacks are matters of contradiction to the novelist as they remain in ignorance and unenlightenment. In fact, every novel of Toni Morrison is meant to be a lesson to learn for every black. It is a deep reading of the psycho-pathology of the black race. The minds of the blacks are warped and twisted by the values imposed on them by the whites. In the language of Freud neurosis and psycho-pathology are nothing but failures on the part of anyone to face reality and come to terms with it. This is applicable to the blacks because they are yet to see the reality. What they now see is only a mirror of reflection of reality shown by the white system of values

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