

HISTORICIZING TONI MORRISON AND HER FICTION

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Abstract

*The objective of this article is to explore the historicity of Toni Morrison and her major novels. In other words, the article will find out that the novels of Toni Morrison are the products of the wretched past of slavery. Toni Morrison has given vent to her feelings through her writings. Whatever she has felt and experienced in her personal life, has gone into the making of her writings. Here an attempt is made to show that Toni Morrison and her major novels are the products of history. The novels like *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz* are based on the history of slavery that the Blacks were subjugated through centuries. The article is going to present the correlation of Morrison's above novels with the history, at the backdrop of which these texts are produced.*

Keywords: *Historicity, Slavery, Middle Passage, Racism, Great Migration.*



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Introduction

Toni Morrison, with her literary and artistic touch has not only participated in the canon of Black American Literature, but also has done a lot to influence, expand, solidify and glorify the same with a tint of Black American history as literature does not exist without history and the vice-versa. What has happened to the Africans on American soil is a matter of history, which has been seized with the wings of time. But the representation of those happenings with 'a shucking, knee-slapping, wet-eyed laughter' (*Sula*, 10) is the duty of a responsible author, who takes the bold step not to tell a lie during the time of fictionalizing the history. Morrison's excellence lies in achieving a delicate balance between writing a truly black literature and writing a truly universal black literature with a commitment and dedication towards her own people, their lives and their happenings. How the Africans were subjugated and silenced, how their humanity, history and identity were stolen systematically and were lost eventually, and how their role in building a complete nation was denied and ignored is reflected in the works of Toni Morrison. She has labored much to represent the national shame about the institution of slavery in her writings which has been and will continue to be an inseparable part of the history of the U.S. for all ages to come.

The history and culture, literature and civilization of the United States are not clear and transparent without recognizing the importance of the African-American presence. The people of Africa are not only a name, an identity, a category, but also explicitly or implicitly, this dark presence has been there both as a visible and an invisible mediating force. The complimentary terms 'Blackness', 'Race', 'Racism', etc. relate to the historical and political context at every level. The Africans are the natural people of Africa: the hair, the skin, physical structures are all specific characteristics to live in the African landscape. The motherhood of this cultural group is primarily Africa; hence the justification and relevance of the name.

Black and Africa are not interchangeable in any logical sense. Practically, the African history varies from the Black history in many respects. Black history is the history of enslavement, torture, inhumanity and horror, which is one of the worst scourges known to humankind. African history is the history of humanity. For over 40,000 years there were only native people of Africa on this planet. It is very logical, historical and social to describe people by their land of origin. History records that every conflict has a central theme – 'Land'. Human demands are unlimited. He needs land to grow crops on, to source water from; he needs a place to build cities and a place to harvest mineral wealth from. So attaching one's identity to land makes sense; attaching one's identity to an abstract color, does not. According to Ezekiel Mphahlele, the basic ascendancy-submission, superior-inferior, white-black, have-have not, master-slave relationships were there just because of the aggressiveness of white American citizens. When a people know who they are, they will know what they have to do to make themselves free. However the Africans are not entering history for the first time, but are re-entering the main stream of history. The African history connects to all of the world's entire nations. Since the beginning, the people of West Africa had a rich and varied history and culture. They had very systematic political arrangements including kingdom, states and other organizations, each with their own languages and culture. The kingdoms were very large and powerful with monarchs, governing thousands of subjects. Africans were rich with art, learning and technology and skilled in subjects like Medicine, Mathematics and Astronomy. They also made fine luxury items in bronze, ivory, gold and terracotta for both local use and trading purpose. Through the merchants of North Africa they had traded with the Europeans for centuries. The Portuguese were the first traders to sail down the West African coast in the Fifteenth century followed by the Dutch, British, French, and Scandinavians. The merchants

were primarily interested in precious items like gold, ivory and spices, particularly pepper. Through these merchants, the European traders dared to kidnap and buy the Africans to sell in Europe. It was the Seventeenth century, when the plantation owners wanted more and more slaves to satisfy the increasing demand for sugar in Europe. Now slavery became the dominant trade. By the Eighteenth century, slavery and the slave trade had been conducted with such regularity that it became an institution that was taken for granted.

The slavery system spreads every culture, nationality and religion from ancient times to the present day although the status, position and situation of the slaves vary according to different times and places. Slavery was developed as a system of social stratification. It is a Holocaust which is constantly denied, mitigated and trivialized. Slavery made people invisible from historical contribution and reduced them with mere labor units, commodities to be traded. It is an economic system in which the rules of property law are applied to humans. The slaves are considered as the human property, to be owned, bought and sold accordingly. The slave trade has been considered as precious with long lasting disastrous, demographic, economic and political effects on Central Africa. Here the question arises that how slaves were procured and who could be enslaved. From the beginning of Africa's relationship with the Europeans, the kingdom of Kongo, which belongs to the Central Africa, relied on the slave exportation in order to maintain the diplomatic, material and cultural rapport with Europe. The African slaves played a fundamental role in growing colonial cash crops, which were exported to Europe. In turn, the European goods were used for importing African slaves, who were bought on the sea lane from Africa to North America and South America. It is known as the 'Middle Passage' which was the route of the triangular slave trade in which millions of Africans were shipped to America. The 'Triangular Trade' is a historical term which carries slaves, cash crops and manufactured goods among West Africa, American colonies and the European colonial powers from the late 16th century to early 19th centuries. Paul E. Lovejoy describes in his book entitled, *Transformations in Slavery* that the European powers such as Portugal, England, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Brandenburg, Brazil, and North America participated in this trade. The enslaved Africans came mostly from eight regions: Senegambia, Upper Guinea, Windward Coast, Gold Coast, Bright of Benin, Bright of Biafra, West Central Africa and South Eastern Africa.

The African kings and private kidnapers sold captive slaves to the Europeans who own several coastal forts. The slaves were considered as cargo to be transported to America as

quickly and cheaply as possible. Labor was required for plantation and transportation of coffee, tobacco, cocoa, sugar, cotton, silver mines, rice fields, construction industries and as domestic servants. As the demand for slave labor increased so did brutality towards the slaves. Unfortunately, the slaves who began this journey across the Atlantic Ocean were not successful and died before reaching the Western Hemisphere. In the process of capturing and transporting indigenous people to the ships, many Africans died at sea with a considerable high mortality rate. The total number of deaths of the Africans in the Middle Passage due to depression, lack of freedom, family, food, space, drinking water, and sanitation has been estimated up to 2 million.

Toni Morrison's most acclaimed fifth novel, *Beloved* is dedicated to "Sixty million and more". This phrase "Sixty million and more" refers to the estimated number of the African slaves rounded up for the slave trade who either died while waiting for transportation or died during the passage on the slave ships. Although this figure is not accurate, still it holds the most reliable educated guess that Morrison could find. Through this estimation, Morrison is trying to find out the full story of the slave trade, much of which has been ignored, left behind or simply lost. Jan Furman in his book *Toni Morrison's Fiction* describes:

Of these millions, Morrison writes, No one praised them, nobody knows their names, and nobody can remember them, not in the United States or Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore (85).

The Slave Trade was an international institution from which many nation-states benefited economically. It was not until the 20th century that the international community started its effort to prohibit such acts. There were protestations and campaigns against this institution. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. This act required citizens from Free states to cooperate in the capture and return of the free as well as fugitive slaves. The refugees from slavery fled the South across the Ohio River and other parts of the Mason-Dixit line dividing North from South via the Underground Railroad. In response to the Fugitive Slave Act, Sethe, the fugitive slave mother in *Beloved* found no other way except killing her own baby girl and attempting to murder her other children rather than submitting them to slavery. She never wished any slave master to differentiate between the animal characteristics and the human characteristics of her own children like her. Being a mother, she struggles to save

her children from a predictable brutal future. That is why she fled for Ohio. Unfortunately, in Ohio she spends only twenty eight days of freedom with her children, mother-in-law and neighbors and is able to be a mother of her children for the first time in her life. Then suddenly, Schoolteacher arrives Ohio in search of them. At the sight of the slave catchers Sethe's mother love overwhelms her. She wants to kill her children, but does not succeed in killing all but one, her two year old daughter. She slashes her infant daughter's throat rather than see her in chains. The scene of this horrible incident is described as follows: "Two were lying open-eyed in saw-dust, a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one---" (*Beloved* 11).

When Sethe completed her imprisonment, she still has some satisfaction: "I stopped him; I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (164). In *New York Times* article, Morrison stated, "Killing was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (qtd. In Mervyn Rothstein). According to Kashinath Ranveer,

No doubt, what was done by Sethe could be wrong in the eyes of moralists, but she did it because she was surrounded by the most immoral and unjust world where justice and self-respect could not be restored except by way of injustice and self-destruction. Thus she moves from the state of total ignorance and unawareness about herself towards the state of totally awakened self. This awareness is achieved at a painful cost... (249).

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the executive order: "The Emancipation Proclamation". This historical event changed the legal status of slaves in a single stroke, as 3 million slaves in designated areas became free. In order to escape the segregation of Jim Crow, racial discrimination, poverty, identity crisis and the unchecked violence of lynching, in the 1920s, eight lacks blacks left the South. Again in the 1930s, during the time of The Great Depression another 398,000 blacks left the South due to decrease in personal income, tax revenue, employment opportunity, profits and stock prices. Over 3,348,000 blacks left the South for Northern and Western cities between 1940 and 1960. Pecola, the black child protagonist in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, grows up during the years following the Great Depression in Lorain, Ohio. She is ignored, unattended and despised both at home and school just because the fact that she is black, ugly and dirty. Her father Cholly, is abusive, alcoholic, violent and aggressive because of his troublesome upbringing. Pauline, Pecola's mother

escapes into a world of dreams, hopes and fantasy that turns into the movies she enjoys viewing. She finds pleasure in working for a rich white family by neglecting her own. Within the problems of facing domestic violence, bullying at school, sexual assault, and living in a community that associates beauty with “whiteness”, she suffers from low self-esteem and views herself as ugly. She wishes for white skin with beautiful blue eyes so that she would be loved by her parents at home, she would acquire more and more friends and attention from the teachers at school, and above all, the disturbances between her father and mother would be ended. But, ironically the poor daughter is raped and abused by the degraded and drunken father. She gets mad with the birth of a dead child and meets an unseen fate. As the poor migrants from the rural South, the characters are unable to support themselves within a family. There is a disjointed relationship between husband-wife, miserable relationship between parent-child, where there is no love, no support, nothing. They have become devoid of good things just because the economic and historical scenario that Morrison has perfectly presented. The plight of the free blacks has been a great historical event in the History of U.S. This great migration from South gave the free slaves another chance to try their luck in the North. Morrison’s *Jazz* deals with the story of migration, resettlement and employment of Violet and Joe Trace, Violet’s husband in the new society. Whether they achieve their target or not and their post migration stress and frustration due to maladjustment and conflicting situations have been beautifully represented in this novel. In *Sula* also the life in the North after migration is too difficult due to racial segregation. The white settlers in the North look down upon the black poor niggers. Their life tragedy is the eternal source of joke for the whites. On the other hand, Shadrack, a World War 1 veteran has been devastated by the horror of the war in a way that now he involves compartmentalizing his fear of death in a ritual he invents and names National Suicide Day, which is unusual and unique. This novel basically deals with the mature friendship between Sula and Nel whose different views and approaches about life and selfhood lead to conflicts resulting in the fragmentation of their lives and relationship with pain, loss and death. Along with these things, Plum’s intentional death, Nel’s marriage to Jude, Sula’s leaving the city for creating an identity and then return to make an illicit affair with Nel’s husband, sleeping with whites, breaking the existing rules of the black community in the name of freedom, Eva’s shifting to an old age home despite the fact that once she endangered her life to feed her children after her husband left her, and finally Sula’s death leaving Nel alone as a half identity reflect how disgusting the life was in

the new place where one is being treated just like an outsider without any right and promise of citizenship. Most of them were so unfortunate to face the problems like racial segregation, housing, non-citizenship, disenfranchisement, rigid way of tax payment for public services, etc. Slavery has been abolished from the historical and political scenario, but the African Americans cannot get rid of the dreadful effects of this institution.

Conclusion

Centuries of struggle to fight back and uproot slavery has become the past, but its burden is too heavy to carry in the present. Almost all Morrison's novels provide this pathetic display of human dignity. It seems as if the history is recalled and retold in the form of fiction. At the end of the novel *Beloved*, there is a repetition of lines, "It was not a story to pass on", "It was not a story to pass on" and "This is not a story to pass on" (323-324). It shows that it is not a story to be taken lightly, but the story is too terrible to relate. This book stands for those "sixty million and more" who perished unknown and unmourned in slavery and becomes a testimony to those ancestors whose presence continues to endure the love and recognition in order to survive.

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