

African American Literature and Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT:

African American writers experimented with "the novel of social realism" (Tradition, 340) because of their distinctive black social and cultural experience. The earliest fictions were "freedom of the romances" (340) with an appeal for their culture but at the level of realism, this kind of fiction was silent on the upcoming moral and political issues of the day like racism, classism and sexism. The identity of African Americans in the pre- and post- emancipated decades has been shaped by different circumstances. Toni Morrison considered fiction as an indispensable medium through which people structure knowledge based on different myths. There is a variety and richness of myths in Morrison's novel which govern and shapes them. The paper is a tribute to her contributions which remain as a mark of history offering new insights and interpretations from time to time.

KEYWORDS: African American, Social Realism, Culture, Identity, Black, Race.

The tradition of African American literature is a socio-political continuum where people, individually or collectively, recreate their historical past as well as contemporary present which is also very important because it motivates them and provides them with a sense of identity. W. E. B. Du Bois said, "... [] slavery was the archcrime, and lynching and lawlessness its twin abortion" (436). Thus, episodes like slavery, emancipation, reconstruction, post-reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanization and last but not the least racism were a stream of events that have resulted in social ambivalence and double vision in African American culture and its people. Frantz Fanon said, "[] the black is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of effect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must but extricate" (2). Phyllis Wheatley's *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1773) was the first book published by a black slave in America. The list of early fictions includes, "The Heroic Slave" (1853) by Fredrick Douglass, *Clotel or The President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown, *The Garries and Their Friends* (1857) Frank J. Webb, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1857) by Hannah Crafts, *Our Nig or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) by Harriet E. Wilson, *Blake or The Huts of America* (1859) by Martin R. Delany and "The Two Offers" (1859) by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* were exceptions because most of the novels reinforced the myth of white supremacy and blackness as the symbol of evil. Francis Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola LeRoy, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) is considered to be the first novel by an African American woman. When black writers made the first move from the writing of narratives to the writing of novels, it was stepping across a void because they had no tradition to follow. However, the moment of transition was one of failure because "ignoring their own history and culture, the early black writers attempted to create a literature patterned upon that of whites" (Gayle, 6). Hence the confusion prevailed as to whether they were writing Black or White literature. At this point, interpretations and conclusions varied greatly in the works of both black and white writers because "...blacks stressed the sins of slavery, most whites stressed the slavery of sin" (Tradition, 341). Thus, earlier African American literature can be called, in J. Saunders Redding's fine and fitting phrase, "a literature of necessity" (Gayle, 8) and an "active struggle" (Williams, 36).

An urgent need at this hour was to tap the roots of African culture and history for matter and method. Thus, earlier African American novels were primarily a socio-cultural phenomenon and the evolution of novel writing process was a "cyclical movement in the tradition from reality as fable to fable as reality" (Graham, 342). The ambivalence of black novelists was evident because they were spokespersons of a race which was regarded a myth. In the books, whites were always 'good' (good symbols were white) and blacks were 'evil'. It must be pointed out that on whatever level of contact blacks and whites came together, there was always a reinforcement of the myth of white supremacy asserting- "If you is white, you's alright, if you's brown, stick around, but if you's black, hmm, hmm, brother, get back, get back, get back" (a song by Big Bill Broozy). Thus, the prevailing inferiority complex in blacks with whites was destructive for them because they were alienated from their culture, heritage, race and people. Frantz Fanon decries that "...the juxtaposition of the white and black race has created a massive psycho-existential complex" (5). It influenced people on a psychic level and resulted in a fragmented twin-self suffering from fear. This twin-self of black people's mutilated identity was coined as "double-

consciousness” by W. E. B. Du Bois i.e. "...two warring body is one soul”, one black soul and the other alienated distorted black psyche.

The second major breakthrough which happened in the history of African American literature was the American Civil War (1861-1865). According to Bernard W. Bell, novels written before the War are known as Antebellum novels (1853-65), novels written after the War are known as Postbellum novels (1865-1902) and Pre-World War I novels of the Old Guard (1902-17) were written before World War I (Bell, 37). The writers who wrote between 1830 to 1895 are known as Abolitionists and during this time only slavery was abolished and an era of reconstruction started. Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe and others belong to this age. The difference between Antebellum literature and Abolitionist literature was that the Antebellum novels portrayed images of blacks as a servile and inferior race while Abolitionists refuted these images and presented the injustice and horrors of slavery. The Antebellum period was rife with slave narratives written between 1830 to 1860 and surveyed the “images of violence” during slavery, its inception, growth and abolition. Fredrick Douglass' *Slave Narratives* served the example of literary artifacts but these narratives lacked the image of a hero and could be called the American Negro's venture into the novella. The image of “a quasihistorical hero like Daniel Boone or a national figure like George Washington” (Bryant, 23) were portrayed during this time. Stowe's portrayal of Uncle Tom-like negro was also unable to romanticize the reality of the African Americans. These kinds of novellas ended in a conclusion that black writers "should go back to Africa " (Christian, 21) to recognize their strengths. These narratives did not ask any uncomfortable questions based on the politics of color and race, which were first voiced by three African American male novelists before the Civil War named William Wells Brown in *Clotel*, Martin R. Delany in *Blake or The Huts of America* and Frank J. Webb in *The Garries and their Friends*. Thus, having emerged from the condition where these people were sometimes ranked with beasts and sometimes, they found themselves grappling for a name and identity, the image of a warrior provided the model which African American writers desired at that time.

The Age of the Harlem Renaissance (1895-1920), is considered to be "the mecca of the black world in the twenties" (Christian, 7), where "new race pride" blossomed. This movement emerged as a phenomenon and it gave African American literature an impetus. It was a festival of black art, culture, music and paintings and instilled fresh vigor into black writers. Some of the major writers of the movement were Alain Lock, Amiri Baraka, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed and others. There was the arrival of the “New Negro” who was more combative and determined in his approach and slogans like “Black is beautiful” became popular. It is noteworthy here that many African American women writers also started writing during this period though their efforts were unrecognized. Despite women writers like Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, Nella Larson, Jessie Fauset, Dorothy West and others, the only female writer to receive substantial recognition during the 1920s was Zora Neale Hurston. She was like an "oddball eccentric" in the male-dominated black American literature. But the World War I (1914-18) and the Age of Depression (1929) changed the course of black literature because after the War, lynching and race riots increased immensely and provided another topic to the black writers. During this time, lynching was established as a tradition and it subsequently became merged in the verisimilitude of black life.

Thus, an examination of the historical pool of African American literature shows that the politics of color is as old as the existence of man. It had ruled man from time immemorial. The African American literary canon today is an individual wing of literature and is endowed with distinct cultural richness and the pain which had influenced their psyche in more than one way. Initially African American literature was male-oriented written by those who were partly rebel and partly victim in the socio-cultural whirlwind of the white society. However, after World War II, James Baldwin's *Go Tell it to the Mountain* and Ralph Ellison's *Native Son* proved to be manifestoes of rising black aspirations. There was a major shift in the themes of black art and literature. Jerry Bryant said "...for the post-World War II lynching novel, the main change occurred in the temper of the black community" (162). It resulted in the formation of a new hero image and the case of classic lynching was given milder treatment i.e., it was replaced by simple murder.

Black women writers like black men continued to write throughout the Depression years into the 1960s. As a result, the 1960s witnessed a plethora of black female writers but the legacy of male chauvinism in the black literature continued to predominate all these years. Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker were only a few who were accorded a worthy status in the black literature prior to the 1970s. Toni Cade Bambara's anthology, *The Black Woman*, in 1970 was the first to express, according to its jacket notes, "the rising demand by women for liberation from their chattel-like roles in a male-dominated society" (Hernton, 42). The black women writers who wrote before 1960s were known as "Old Timers" and the ones, who wrote during the 1960s and 1970s were known as “late bloomers”, to borrow phrases from Calvin C. Hernton as they arrived late on the black literary scene. The growth of the woman's movement, and its impact on the consciousness of African-American women in particular, helped to fuel a "black women's literary renaissance” in the 1970s. Thus, during the 60s and 70s, themes of African American literature changed drastically. Morrison, as a rising sun, went on to publish *Sula* and other works after the success of *The Bluest Eye* and became the most influential African-American writer of the

20th century. At this point of time the success of writers like Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker helped to inspire a generation of younger black female novelists, including Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor. Later African American women writers include the novelists Paule Marshall, Octavia E. Butler, Gayl Jones, Jamaica Kincaid, and poets like Audre Lord, Rita Dove and the playwrights like Ntozake Shange, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Alice Childress and Maria Irene Fornes.

Thus, emerging in an era when African American writing was predominantly male-oriented and "a MAN'S world" (Hernton, 38), these women novelists emerged as saviors to rescue their culture and racial pride. Women writers like Alice Walker had used "African American" and "black" interchangeably in her essay, *In Search Of Our Mother's Garden*, and takes pride in calling herself and her characters black. These writers defined the role of "black women writers" and their fiction was a mirror image of the existing sexism and racism in a racially-divided country. A lot of work has been done probing the character of black women in the fiction of both white and black male writers. Earlier African American literature portrayed black woman as mammy, concubine or conjure woman and also as the tragic mulatta. They have been called "the mule of the world", to borrow from Hurston, "Superwomen", "Mean and Bitches", "Matriarchs", to borrow from Alice Walker. Though an activist writing such as that of Amiri Baraka presents an entirely different stereotype of an idealized black woman saluted as a Queen or Mother of the Universe. These women were triply jeopardized. First in being black, secondly in being women and thirdly in being black women. Hence, the black women's burden was peculiarly different from the females of other racial and ethnic groups.

Black women writers were confronted with the same racial climate as their male counterparts but they were not taken as seriously as black male writers. According to Alice Walker, there were two reasons for this. One among them was that she was a woman and critics, especially black males, were ill-equipped to discuss and analyze the works of these women writers impartially. Black male writers always talked about the works of black women writers and not about what they wrote (260-261). Broadly speaking, black women writers write from different angle but it is not only their writing but also the issues they raised and the manner in which they defined their race and culture that made black women novelist more important. The root of the problem was a clear line that separated the slave narratives of men and women regarding the influences that women particularly mothers, grandmothers, and other relations, have on their later lives. In case of black men, the emphasis felt on the deprivations caused by the absence of childhood nurturing which unstable family situations created for them while black women searched ways to pattern their own lives after perceiving the heroism in their female elders because there was always a strong female bonding that existed with forbearers, and this, perhaps, invested in them the power to resist, survive and transcend their own oppression (McKay, 232).

It becomes pertinent here to mention that the first black person ever to win a Nobel Prize in 1950 for Peace was Ralph Bunche. The first black person to win a Nobel Prize other than Peace was Sir William Arthur Lewis in 1979 for economics. However, the first black male to receive the same prize for literature was Wole Soyinka in 1986 and the first black woman to receive it was Toni Morrison in 1993. Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison were also awarded prestigious Pulitzer Prizes. Barack Obama became the first African American President of the United States and has been re-elected to the office of the President. He had also won a Nobel Prize for Peace in 2009. This list of black people whose works were acknowledged is in stark contrast to the oppressive and humiliating treatment given to blacks in the past. But contemporary African American writers like Ntozake Shange, Rita Dove, who is the youngest and the first Nobel Laureate, and Derek Walcott do not write about the era, which was filled with struggle and oppression. They are unable to connect to it as it was case of writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Ann Petry, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall. The works of earlier African American women writers was the process of "rewriting history" or "reclaiming the past", and they were influenced by black art movements whereas contemporary African American writers grew up in a free, more democratic set up and as such have a cosmopolitan outlook and write about contemporary issues. As a matter of fact, these contemporary African American writers have travelled a long way from the time of slavery and probably this has changed both their text and the context.

It is important here to also point out that though there is a long-standing alliance between white feminists and black feminists but even then black women writers write very differently from white feminist writers. Black women writers present a critique of patriarchy and contend that the liberation of black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. Black feminist theory has argued that black women are positioned within structures of power in fundamentally different ways than white women. Black feminist organizations emerged during the 1970s and faced many difficulties from both the white feminist and misogynist black nationalist political organizations they were confronting.

Toni Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature has penned eight novels in all. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved* (1987) etc., to name only a few. They reveal a consistency in Toni Morrison's vision of the human condition, particularly in her preoccupation with the effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated acceptable self. Her characterization of Cholly Breedlove is presented initially as a 'mimitive' only a more sordid type than Deighton of Paule

Marshall's *BrownGirl, Brownstones*. Almost God-like in his narcissism he has no sense of family or community and fears nothing. In *Song of Solomon*, she again raises the myth of the American man, Milkman who eventually comes to maturity and learns the meaning of the drama that marked his birth.

Morrison is a literary giant who had earned "a place in the canons of world literature", to use Trudier Harris' words. Morrison's novels move in both "linear and circular, a Yeatsian gyre that spins back in itself but inevitably leads upward to new ways of seeing old systems of belief" (Rhodes, 12). Morrison delves deep into the lives of African American male characters in her novels, examining how various circumstances concerning identity crisis and unemployment wounded their psyche and how they were left clueless about solutions to their struggle. Caught in the negative racial stereotypes and ideologies related to black culture, these characters were not able to survive the ill-effects of slavery. Denise Heinze quotes Henry Louis Gates Jr., saying that "race" and "racial values" are not biological but cultural phenomenon. "Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups or adherents of specific belief systems which more often than not also have fundamentally opposed economic interests" ().

Morrison's novels expose how black males internalize the feeling of otherness, poverty and loss and how it generates self-hatred which according to Samuel and Hudson "...is the most destructive element in their lives; the central element they lack is self-love" (13). Characters like Cholly Breedlove, Guitar Bains and Macon Dead represent the mad, destructive and anarchic tendencies while others like Paul D, Milkman, Son, Stamp Paid and Hi man represent constructive and balanced behavior.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, documents Cholly's journey of life from childhood to adulthood and how his life becomes a testament of defeat at each and every step. He was an orphan and the first emasculation which he ever had was at the funeral of Aunt Jimmy where he was interrupted, humiliated and mocked at during his first sexual act by the intrusion of two white hunters. That incident had two basic implications on his life. First, it distorted his sense of masculinity because he was not able to protect a black girl and secondly in being a black man, he was not able to fight white hunters and considering himself weak, he diverted his hatred towards the girl. It distorted his perception of black women. Thus, living in a society which looked upon African American people as "the other" (27), Cholly's childhood canvas was full of mockery, humiliation, shame and helplessness, and he had no one to rescue him. Thus, Cholly's journey towards life becomes a journey into degeneration, destruction and death. As an adult, Cholly tries to save his inner-self from humiliation and shame by marrying Pauline but it does not help her either. He raped his own daughter because of "guilt and impotence..." (127) on being "a burned-out black man" and at his inability to love and protect her. It was "a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence". Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), reveals how wounds were inflicted on the psyche of Guitar Bains. He was a member of a destructive organization because the memory of his father's death and his mother accepting compensation money which the sawmill owner gave to her created a permanent scar on his psyche. Due to this he developed aggression and violence towards the white race and joined a terrorist organization, The Seven Days, so that he could avenge the murder and exploitation inflicted on his community. Racial discrimination not only separated black men from whites but also separated them from their inner selves too. Guitar's story is not very different from other black males. But as said earlier, every person has a different kind of perception and behavior according to his conditions. Perhaps this is why Milkman and Guitar are different, Cholly and Milkman are different and likewise Cholly and Guitar are also different. Guitar's mother might have accepted forty dollars from the sawmill owner because she knew that those forty dollars would play an important role in filling up their empty stomachs, at least for some time and her children wouldn't die of starvation and malnutrition. Guitar harbored deep aggression, violence and terrorism for white people, who he thought were responsible for all this. He killed Pilate at the end of the novel which ended on an ambiguous note, "As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother." But the message is definitely loud and clear "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337). Milkman was not at all angry and revengeful rather he wanted Guitar to learn as he did. Morrison's next novel, *Tar Baby* (1980) also explores the wounded psyche of William Green alias Son. Born and raised in Eloë, Son was in conflict with himself because it was a conflict "between knowing his power and the world's opinion of it." This was also the reason he felt secluded in the world of whites and felt "unilateral." But Son had "chosen solitude and the company of other solitary people opted for it when everybody else had long ago surrendered, because he never wanted to live in the world their way" (283). His psyche was wounded by a hegemonic class system. Exploitation, unemployment and identity crisis were some urgent issues which inflicted deep scars on the psyche of almost every black male. Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, is a detail of slavery, and the genesis of the story goes back to the real-life incident of Margaret Garner. The abolition of slavery freed them physically but they were haunted by those memories forever. Paul D and Stamp Paid are two black male

characters whose psyche was wounded due to the time they had spent at the plantation farm, 'The Sweet Home' and its memories had altered their behaviors.

II. CONCLUSION:

The oeuvre of Toni Morrison is a testament of African American culture, society, people and women. She embarks on a journey in her fiction, prose and stories to reach her silent goals which she sets for herself and community but eventually those goals have proven to play an important role in the history of African American Literature. This paper is a rejoinder to “sing the song” of a literary giant whose works will echo in the annals of time to guide humanity in thick and thin.

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