RACIAL DISCRIMINATION WITHIN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IN TONI MORRISON’S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Racism is a code of social order and consequently it is studied in sociological perspective, because it not only determines the bond of rights and duties but also liabilities and responsibilities. Toni Morrison portrays the futility of Racism in black society at the various layers of experiences. Of all Afro American writers today Toni Morrison’s work stands out because of its variety and multidimensional approach to the black experience in white America. Her novels show that her creative vision not only reflects American social reality but also helps to shape it by highlighting the present multi racial nature of contemporary society. Her novel encourages American society to think long and deeply about its future so that attitude of both black and white American towards one another and towards each other may change for the better Morrison closely studies the black and whites psychology in her work and enables us to get a glimpse into their domestic life, married life, business activities and then effort to survive against the hostile circumstances and to save their children from the cruel clutches of the white establishment.

In this work we endeavor to make a comprehensive and critical study of psycho-social analysis in the black community as conceived by Toni Morrison in her novels. We also try to present consciousness of the race at various levels in order to penetrate and portray the mode of existence of the characters drawn in the fictional world of Toni Morrison, and display a life in a social and cultural framework focusing on the actions, reactions and counteractions of the characters within the gamut of relationship and highlight the similarities and differences between them. An attempt is to be made to rationalize their action or behavior in the light of the specific context of their situations.

KEYWORD: Racism, Afro American writers, African American, Communities Toni Morrison’s novel

INTRODUCTION

To be black and female, is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and pronounced gender bias, possibly no other social group has been subjected to such an unedifying spectacle of human debasement and depravity. Being black, the African women suffered from racism[3]; being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks and being former slaves. The white establishments forced them to live on meager resources and were compelled to remain poor. In short, the black women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy- racism, sexism, and classism[4]. Thus began the oppressive story of racism in America. It
brought with it pain, sorrow, bloodshed, death and, above all, the negation of an entire race. The African-American race was ghettoized, persecuted and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. Racism, as a life-threatening, non-nurturing force, exists even today, thus becoming the forum for all types of discussion.

Morrison, a women of many talents, comes from a long line of hard working, industrious black people who actively fought racial oppression, inferior social and economic status. Fleeing poverty of mind and body and searching for better educational opportunities for their children, her maternal grandparents left Alabama and travelled by way of Kentucky to Ohio early in the century. Her father, a Georgian by birth also fled that hostile racial climate and settled in Ohio. The second of four Children, Morrison, born Chloe Anthony Welford, grew up in Lorain, Ohio, during the Great Depression Even then she learned that neither race, class, nor gender precluded opposition to inhumane conditions. Morrison’s childhood world was not primarily dominated by black responses to white oppression. In fact in Lorain, where everyone was poor, neighborhoods were less rigidly segregated than in many parts of the country, and overt racial hostility was not prevalent. Memorable are her recollections of the richness of black lore black myths, and the cultural rituals of her family and community. As a teenager, Morrison read the European literary masters English, Russian, and French.

Morrison attended Howard University, Where she changed her name to Toni, and received an undergraduate degree in English. Then she earned a master’s degree from Cornell University. Her thesis was on Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. In 1957, as, an instructor in English, she returned to Howard from Taxes Southern University where she had gone on her first teaching appointment At Howard, she began to write, but little came of it there. It took marriage, two sons, a divorce, an eighteen –month return to Lorain, an editing job at the textbook subsidiary of Random House in Syracuse and writing at night after the children were asleep (to combat the loneliness she felt then and there) to bring her efforts to full bloom. In 1970, The Bluest Eye appeared from Holt, Richard, and Winston. By this time Morrison had moved to an editorial position at Random House in New York City.

Morrison was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African American to win this honor. Morrison's novels explore issues of African-American female identity in stories that integrate elements of the oral tradition, postmodern literary techniques, and magical realism to give voice to the experiences of women living on the margins of white American society. As a best-selling African-American female author, Morrison represented a breakthrough for other black women novelists to succeed in the mainstream publishing industry. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Song of Solomon (1977), the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for Beloved (1987), and the 1996 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Four of her novels were chosen for the Oprah Winfrey national book club, and Beloved was adapted to film as a major motion picture produced by and starring Winfrey.
Her talent in the art of addressing universal issues was splendid, thus making the stories in her novels appeal to Blacks and Whites alike. In that respect, Toni Morrison’s writings engage a wide variety of readers in compelling themes that turn around love, equality, community survival, racial and sexual politics, to name but a few. In fact, it is through those ‘universals’ that she deals with rewriting history, re-assessing cultures, investigating and confronting stereotypes of what it means to be Black or White as well as what it means to be a man or a woman in the United States of America.

**MORRISON’S ACCENT IN NOVELS**

Toni Morrison is the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature, whose work has been described as amazingly high”. She astutely describes aspects of the blacks’ lives and especially of blacks as the people they are. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world as ugly, but the uniqueness of Toni Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and the hope beneath the surface of black America. Combining the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women’s Liberation, she seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and Women’s Liberation, she seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black. But the artistic excellence of Morrison’s fiction lies in achieving a balance between writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature[9][11][12]. Although firmly grounded in the cultural heritage and social concern of black Americans, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature, exhibiting universal mythic patterns and overtones[6].

Novels Written

Toni Morrison explores the theme of Afro-American consciousness of the race[7][10].

The Bluest Eye [1] has the ingredients of black voice railing against they myth of the black monolith and the racist supremacy. The story of a year in the life of Pocola Breedlove a young girl in Ohio who is suppressed, subjugated and marginalized socially and psychologically due to racism. Her mother Pauline too is troubled by her life and her father Cholly’s negligence, frustration lead him to commit incest due to excessive racism such that the characters in the novel are deprived of their identity both morally and socially.

Her second novel Sula (1973) depicts how the intimate black friends suffer torture both mentally and physically due to racism from childhood physically to maturity till death.

Her other novel Tar Baby also focuses themes of racial identity, sexuality, class and family dynamics. Her other masterpiece Beloved which had won Pulitzer prize in 1988 focuses on the psychology of an old daughter referred as beloved due to chains of racism.

In her next novel Sula (1974), Morrison depicts the quest of a female protagonist, Sula, for creating her own self an coming to terms with her identity as a black woman. Morrison demonstrates the difficulties the black women. Morrison demonstrates the difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self. Morrison creates an unusual world in the novel. Sula, her mother Hannah, and grand mother Eva peace live in a place called Botton in Medallion City, Ohio Sula is born in a family where the women reign supreme. Eva and Hannah act as role models to Sula. Theirs is a
women centered universe. They live in a world they have create, and though they are married. Neither Eva nor Hannah is ever known by the man’s name she is married to. Sula is in quest of her selfhood, therefore she is prepared to defy the rules, codes mores and customs which bring constraints on her life and behavior. Unlike other Medallion Women, including Eva and Hannah. Sula refuses to marry and raise a family. She feels no obligation to please anyone unless she gets pleasure.

Song of Soloman (1977); is a story of Milkman , his father Mecon Dead II, mother Ruth Foster Dead, sisters Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthian, and aunt Pilate Dead, her daughter Reba and grand daughter Hagar. On the one hand, Milkman is linked with his father and his values. And on the other with his aunt and her values. Macon Dead II is. In fact, “more white than black”. He is thoroughly Euro centric while Pilate is Afro-centric in her approach. Pilate, challenges the very social order that refuses the admission. Thus she succeeds in creating a matriarchal social orde at least in the place owned by her. Like Eva, she takes care of her family and presides over it life a true matriarch.

Tar Baby (1981) is an assimilation and advancement of the primary theme of Morrison’s three earlier works. The Bluest Eye, Sula and song of Soloman. In her first three works Morrison confronts the notion of ideal family to which the black community aspires and, what is more, exposes the surface respectability and security represented by the husband, wife and children. The focal point of her criticism, as Susan will explains, “is not necessarily the nuclear family pesse, but the capitalistic patriarchy that relies the nuclear family. She uses insanity and death as a way to bring the reader back to the reality of the corrupting and destructive forces of race, gender and class in an oppressive society.

But in her fourth novel, Tar Baby, for the first time, she frees her work from the narrow geographical boundaries of American society. She shifts from polarizing feminine households and nuclear families to exposing the decadence of the white family and finally to historicizing the emotional and psychological obstacles to familial bliss incurred by blacks. She thus expands her vision of the family beyond the constraints of time, place and dimension in and endeavour to reconstruct the origins and significance of family. She no longer focuses exclusively on the black family and community, using them mainly as a referent for showing how far blacks have strayed from their “ancient properties.”

Tar baby is set on a Caribbean island, Isledes chevaliers owned by a retired Euro-American candy magnate-Velerian Street. It focuses on a Variety of relationships w ith in valerian’s househole between the butler/maid couple-Sydeny and Qudine Childes-and Valerian and his wife, Margaret and between the indoor house servants and the outdoor field servants; Gideon and therese. The central focus, however is on the relationship between the European-educated African-American woman, Jadine Childes and a Florida-born African man son.

The most striking aspect of the relationship between Jadine and son is that “each, viewing the other’s world as impoverished and unsafe, sees it as an occasion to ‘rescue’ the other”.

Thus we can say that the central dramatic tension in the novel is in Jadine’s relationship to Son, a Black man who is found in the street mansion the same aight their son Michael is expected but does not arrive. The local island-folk appear on and off throughout the novel but does not arrive. The local island-folk
appear on and off throughout the novel, but the most important one is Marie Therese, who guides the displaced son to a reconnection with his mythic past.

In the novel Morrison constructs her story by tightly meshing a respect for African values and image of nature with the experiences of a black man and woman together on a topical island. A personified nature actively intervenes on this island. Naturis reactious to the change wrought by civilization are human like; the river become a “poor, insulted, broken hearted” stream. The daisy trees are “serene, but clouds break apart in a state of “confusion”. Invested as she is with all the emotive passion of a human, nature becomes a character in-this story. Tar Baby develops a thematic interpretation of natural elements-an explicit thematic interlay basic to an African view of the universe.

Her novel jazz is based on a sensational incident. The novel deals with a story of a faithful wife Violet, who disfigures the face of even the dead eighteen-year-old beloved of her husband. Joe Trace, an unfaithful husband, who has a right to ask for faithfulness. Through this novel Morrison reveals the predicament of black women in a white, racist, sexist America.

Paradise[2] (Written in 1998) This was the first novel released by Morrison following her receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

RACISM IN THE BLUEST EYE AND PARADISE NOVELS

In The Bluest Eye and in Paradise Toni Morrison has created two thoroughly racialized communities. Both communities are crippled by racism but in different ways. In the Bluest Eye Morrison has created a dualistic tale of the oppressors and the oppressed. The novel illustrates how the racism which exists within the African American community can be seen as an effect of the oppression and racism its members have been subjected to by whites. The racism, oppression and marginalisation have corroded the character’s self-esteem and sense of self worth. Most of the African-Americans portrayed in the book feel contempt for their own blackness.

The character Pecola is based on a real life girl whom Morrison met when she was 11 years old. She and the other little girl discussed whether or not there is a God . Morrison thought so, but the little girl disagreed. The reason was that the little black girl wanted blue eyes. This was a deep and heartfelt wish that she had not been granted. Morrison recalls her reaction well. She had prayed for two years for blue eyes. I remember looking at her. I saw something I hadn’t seen before- an incredibly beautiful face.” Morrison couldn’t understand why this young girl couldn’t see her own beauty and why she would want the most obvious feature of a Caucasian face. When Morrison imagined her friend with the blue eyes that the latter wished for she was revolted. This memory of the little black girl who wanted blue eyes would stay with Morrison for the rest of her life.

In 1965 she started writing The Bluest Eye. It was at the peak of the “Black is beautiful” movement. Morrison started to think about why the movement was needed. “Why, although reviled by others, could his beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation?”
The characters in The Bluest Eye show exactly why such a movement was needed. All of the characters value themselves according to their degree of blackness. Some of them even experience self-contempt and self-loathing because they are considered too black. Yet others, like Geraldine, live their whole lives keeping up appearances. The thought of separating the lighter skinned blacks like herself from darker skinned blacks consumes Geraldine. All of it stems from letting others determine one’s value.

Morrison is using one atypical African-American family to demonstrate what the affects could be of this phenomenon. She has deliberately created an extreme situation to prove a point. Nevertheless all the building blocks of the story exist in reality. All of the characters are affected to some degree, but Pecola succumbs to the difficulties she is facing. This was deliberate. Morrison wanted to show how the most unprotected member of society would be affected. “I focused, therefore, on how something so grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female.”

Blue Eyes are a metaphor that is easily understood. When Pecola wants blue eyes she is really saying that she wants to escape her life and herself. She has defined herself only by her degree of blackness. Pecola and her family regard being a dark skinned black as being synonymous with being ugly. At only eleven years of age the solution Pecola can find regarding the feeling of inferiority and worthlessness is acquiring the symbol of beauty in her community. Blue eyes are regarded as beautiful by all the characters, including mothers and children who unanimously admire Shirley Temple. Pecola is in a desperate situation. She is not appreciated and cared for by her family. Instead she is subjected to neglect and sexual abuse. Furthermore Pecola has no other person or place were she is safe and valued. In the surrounding community she is subjected to considerable intra-racism both by grown ups and her peers. All this adds up and Pecola is becoming more and more obsessed with her wish for blue eyes. The wish is made because she wants to escape her life by becoming something she is not. When Pecola is raped by her father and becomes pregnant by him she goes insane and starts to imagine that she has actually got blue eyes.

Racism within the race is a major theme in The Bluest Eye as well as in Paradise, but there is a difference. There is still a high prevalence of intra-racism, but in Paradise the tables are turned. It is the darker skinned blacks who have formed a sort of aristocracy. They are called the 8-rock. The 8-rock are the darkest skinned blacks with a unbroken blood line. If a family member should have a child with a light-skinned or even worse, white partner, the bloodline is considered tainted. The 8-rock do everything in their power to prevent this from happening. If it does happen it has serious consequences for every one involved.

The citizens of Ruby are connected through a historical narrative about their Founding Fathers. The story is called “The Disallowing”. It refers to all the communities the Founding Fathers tried to join and were rejected from. This historic rejection is ever present in the minds of Ruby’s citizens. The citizens of Ruby have never got over the rejection and humiliation. It has formed all of them into the
proud people they are. The most hurtful part of the disallowing is that they were rejected by lighter skinned blacks as well as by whites and Native Americans. The founding fathers had never expected that the shade of their complexion would matter to another African-American. The anger grew into hatred and the determination to stick to their own was established.

The 8-rock’s sense of superiority and the way in which they feel they are more moral then others is reminiscent of exceptionalist views. Many of the events in Ruby’s history are similar to the history of the puritans who came to America. Both seem to have a sense that they are the chosen people and that their land is the promised land. In Ruby the people regard themselves as chosen for the purpose of making an all-black town function and prosper. There is a connection between the isolationism of Ruby and exceptionalism.

The first period in Ruby is a very happy one. The community is prosperous and everyone feels safe. However in the late sixties and in the seventies the community starts to crumble. Due to the strict blood rule, which says that 8-rocks should only have children with other 8-rocks many children are born “broken”. Many of the 8 rock are sterile so the price of keeping the blood pure is perhaps too steep. Like the Puritans in the 17th century, the 8-rock blame women and the younger generation for their crumbling empire. This leads to a massacre of the women at the house called the Convent.

In Paradise Morrison describes a group of people who have become exactly what they fear and are running from. Instead of creating a paradise they created a racist regime similar to the one they were leaving behind. Isolationism and narrow-mindedness further worsens the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

In her novels Toni Morrison has shown that the lighter skinned African-Americans like Maureen and Geraldine are generally better treated. They are also in a better financial situation then those who are darker skinned. Though they live a comfortable life materially the anguish that people like Geraldine feel is hard to bear. Geraldine and other light-skinned African Americans (women in particular) seem to live their lives scared of losing the position in society they have. The slightest indication that you are a nigger and the same misery other African-Americans have to endure could be waiting.

For the dark skinned African-Americans like the Breedloves, the division between different colours means they are practically in the gutter. Though they have a roof over their heads (most of the time) they live under horrible conditions. They live in the same neighbourhood as the local prostitutes and have a very low income. The impression they have got from the media and the surrounding community is that they are not wanted. No one has shown them their own beauty and because they view themselves through other people’s eyes they consequently believe that they are horrendously ugly.

Through the characters Morrison shows how the oppression that one person is subjected to can destroy not only that person’s life, but the life of generations.
REFERENCES