



A CRITIQUE ON THE IDENTITY AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN TONI MORRISON NOVELS

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ABSTRACT



This paper attempts to focus on how the black people in America suffered for getting their identity and to overcome racial discrimination. Women all over the World are always suppressed based on caste and community. In the novels of Toni Morrison it can be seen clearly especially in *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*. It tells about the oppression of the black race and deals with the cruel treatment of white and how a black women willing to speak up for herself and her ancestors. Her novel expresses the mistreatment of blacks but not of slave life. They lose their freedom and they are treated in a pathetic way but they raise their voice against the white people. Identity plays an important role in literature across countries in the world finding their roots of culture, tradition and community: Australian has 'Aborigines'. Canadians have 'half-breads' and in India we have 'Dalit'. In America they have 'blacks'. Let's see how Morrison shows the struggles of black people through her novels and how they give hope for others who suffer from the same ordeal.

Keywords: *Self-identity, Racism, Slavery, Community Clashes.*

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INTRODUCTION

The word 'Identity' is 'the knowledge of who one is', it comprises of knowing about one's history, culture, tradition and one's own very purpose of existence. In this world, every living creature from small insect to huge animal has a place to live and survive. It shows its own features and exhibits its nature to other creatures, even the animals fight when they were attacked, dominated or killed. These happen in wildlife. Similar things happen and are happening even now among the superior beings: human kind. America with freedom, liberties, rights, prestigious also faced several wars, issues in the country and among its people. When I read about the Afro-American's life it made me more anxious to know about how like India, Afro-Americans were attacked, captured, slaved, tortured, and even killed, for white people's sake of living. It happened for a number of years in the past. Then, they realized it and fought for their identity against racial discrimination. When an animal can't tolerate its suffering, how can a human being? This paper tells how the blacks got into the traps of racial discrimination and lost their identity and at the end, how they suffered and finally conquered them all.

BACKGROUND OF AFRO-AMERICANS

The beginning of African American literature starts from sixteenth century, through the Atlantic slave trade. The people from Africa are transported through ships to countries like Spanish and America. They were not carried over as human beings to live and to occupy a place for themselves. They were transported like cattles and machines to work for the English settlers. The black people were sold and leased like machinery products. They were physically abused and sexually exploited. During that period, America was full of white supremacy and the black people suffered a lot. These practices remained for a number of years and generations. Only few blacks who were allowed to live freely, secretly got education from their masters or owners and got an idea of becoming literate, civilized etc. Then, they decided to form their family groups and lived in a southern region called 'Bottom'. There they practiced their own tradition and cultural heritage. By getting some Christian thoughts and instruction they learned that how people should be treated. They also

understood that every human is equal. So, they demanded equal rights and freedom as white enjoyed.

Changes started between the country and the people. The blacks opposed whites for being slaved, tortured and killed. At first, the white community disagreed and fought against blacks. Since then many laws, agreements, rebellions even war took place between whites and blacks: Anti Amalgamation Law, Stono rebellion, Boston Massacre, Non importation agreements, world war etc. During nineteenth century, Black codes enacted, Civil Rights Act was passed stating that those born in America are citizens of that country. They were given citizenship and some rights to live free, educate themselves and to work etc. Majority of blacks got education but in some regions there were still people experiencing tragic sufferings at the hands of the whites.

EMERGENCE OF AFRO-AMERICANS INTO LITERATURE

The educated blacks wished to voice their struggles faced by their community and their people. So, they decided to write it as novels, short stories, poems, fictions, etc... It was the time of 'Flowering of literature' in twentieth century. It was also called as 'Harlem Renaissance'. Harlem is the neighborhood of Manhattan, mostly populated by African Americans. Harlem was long been a center of black culture. During the 1920's Harlem was the site of the great upsurge in black literature, and music. Renaissance is known as 'Rebirth'. Finally, this period is the rebirth of African Americans and their life and literature. Both these turned like the twin side of same coin in their life span. In American history, this movement had brought a great revolution. It was also called 'New Negro Movement'. This movement focuses on black peoples' sufferings. Harlem renaissance made a great impact in the American culture. It increased the popularity of black culture, poisonous white racism often by more recent racial immigrant continued to affect African-American community. Harlem renaissance focuses on abolition of slavery and the expansion of communities in the North. It was the pride of black people. It became the period of African American superiority which forced them to endure many inequities and injustices.



The only way for black people to earn respect was to raise their voices by Harlem writers. They formed an exclusive group called 'Harlem Writers Club'. It was established by African American writers in New York City in 1950. Some of the famous Harlem writers are Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Lorraine Hansberry etc. Their writing focused on black people and their culture, tradition, slavery, racism, child abuse, sufferings, history and experience in their work.

FINDINGS

This paper focuses on search for identity and racial discrimination in Toni Morrison's novel - *Sula*, *Beloved* and *The Bluest eye*. Toni Morrison was an editor, writer, playwright and literary critic. She has numerous awards for her works: Noble prize in Literature, Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*, National Book Critics Award, Arts and Letter Award for *Song of Solomon*. Four of her novels were chosen as Oprah Winfrey National Book Club. Morrison has also earned a plethora of book world accolades and honorary degrees also receiving the Presidential model of freedom in 2012. Her novels are known for epic themes and exquisite language. Her novels reflect issues of racism, quest for identity, gender bias and sexual abuse, ambiguity of good and evil.

The novel begins with the separation of hilly region by slave owner. He promises to give bottom land to slave but later he declines and instead of giving fertile land near valley the bottom region of hill, he gave them hilly unfertile land and says it is the bottom of sky and it was given. The novel also tells about the character called Shadrack, a twenty two years old black, World War I veteran who suffers from the problems of hallucination. When he is in hospital, he is afraid of Male white nurse. On seeing the food given in a plate, he compares the food in triangle to boundaries: the rice, the meat and Beetroot were separated, which symbolizes white and black who have been separated by valley.

In *Sula*, Morrison explores the importance of female friendship in the formation of individual identity. It is the story of black woman 'Sula' Morrison portrays a contrast in characters to show uniqueness in *Sula*. Nel is quiet and Sula is aggressive. Sula acts on her own way to show herself unique and different among the community, showing oneself

unique was a key to cause self-identity. Racial discrimination is seen in this novel, for instance, The incidents from the novel like when the conductor teases Nel's mother Helene as a 'bitch' and 'gal':

"Her glance moved beyond the white man's face to the passengers seated behind him four or five black faces were watching, two belonging to soldiers still in their shit-colored uniforms and peaked caps. She saw their closed faces, their locked eyes, and turned for compassion to the grey eyes of conductor."(S.19)

Helene's encounter on the train suggests that race doesn't instantly create a sense of community or shared experience. The black soldiers are unwilling or unable to help her out of the situation with the conductor. This reminds us to resist the urge to lump all people of one race together without accounting for differences and distinctions. The other incident during Sula's childhood when the Irish boys teases Nel and Sula saying 'pig meat' it tells that they are not fair, good looking, and they are dark in complexion. When Sula goes to America for higher studies, she returns well dressed, sophisticated, and educated. After few years Sula goes to most important towns and places of social life in United States, she finds male are not good, she returns home because where ever she goes the men and the problem and the emptiness with them are always the same. Women could not find a man who would treat her as another human being. on one hand friendship between women is often ignored, on the other hand no matter how hard she tries, she just learns that friendship with man is impossible. This incident shows that even though they fight against whites, they were not given freedom of self-identification and still they were racially oppressed. And the other incident is Helene tries to bring her daughter in a conventional rules and tradition which shows that families in African American strictly follow and respect their tradition, these are the epic themes of Morrison.

"He would have left him there but noticed that it was a child, not an old black man, as it first appeared" (S.86)

These line states that when the small boy named chicken little neighborhood of Sula who plays



with them every day, once was secretly sailed in boat to play. Suddenly, the boy slips out of sula's finger and died. There is a complete disregard for humanity in the bargeman's racism. Had chicken not been a child he would have been left in the river to rot. His family never knew where he was or what happened to him.

"Just over there was the colored part of the cemetery. She went in. Sula was buried there" (S.59)

Not even death brings an end to racism. Sula is buried in a segregated cemetery in a segregated town, suggesting something eternal about racial discrimination. After Sula's death, Nel and the community realizes the presence of Sula because Sula tries to break social Conventions and through that moral righteousness was influenced to others. Her friend Nel awakens herself and changes her attitude to define herself as a woman and to create an identity of their own which Sula tried to be. Throughout the novel Sula tries to fight against racial discrimination and to pave the way of their own.

Morrison's other novels like *Beloved*, and *The bluest Eye* had a similarity as in the novel Sula. The protagonist Sethe was a black girl. When she was thirteen she was taken as a slave to a plantation. There the sadistic, racist, brother-in-law of Mr. Garner took charge of plantation. When Mr. Garner dies there the slave workers were beaten, tortured, and also killed the slaves who tries to escape. This shows the arrogant nature of whites and their inner depth cruelty of racism in their hearts, and their inferiority complex. Then seethe was taken to jail and white abolitionist rescued her. Later when she got married and had two sons and a daughter again the brother-in-law tried to capture seethe and her female child. Seethe runs into forest and she cut's the baby's throat with the help of saw and behaves like insane. She did it inorder to protect it from white men's slavery and sexual abuse, etc. Throughout her life she suffered a lot and she named the tomb of baby as beloved, the ghost appears and she calls her beloved, seethe was in loneliness, every one abandoned her. Her survival in white community was not easy. But she was bold to face the racist person School teacher. When Denver gets help from Mr. Bodwin, Sethe thinks Bodwin as school teacher and tries to kill him.

Beloved disappears that movement. Sethe and her life became tragic because of racism. Her life is like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep.

The *Bluest eye* exposes the results of white presence in society on African American and how this presence imposes difficulty on the individual to form an identity. In this story also the black girl, Pecola Breedlove believes she is ugly, because she and her community face their ideals of beauty on whiteness. The title *Bluest eye* refers to Pecola's fervent wishes for beautiful blue eyes. Finally Pecola was raped by her own father and she was dismissed from school. She becomes pregnant; the church priest compares her life with the dog which is in front of the door, which is given poison. Its life was compared to Pecola's current situation in novel. She then thought atleast in her mind she had a bluest eye of all. This novel tells the struggle of afro- American in a largely white Anglo Saxon protestant community, racism and suffering as a woman in society. In her other novel *Song Of Solomon* also Morrison expresses the concept of abandoned women , and the alienating effects of racism and individual thirst for getting identity is the primary theme expressed through those novels .

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Morrison, as a woman as well as African American, has a quest for identity because she suffered a lot in her life by the whites. So her novels reflect complex themes of African American community, difference between men and women, issues of racism, Quest for individual identity, innocence of experience, Ambiguity of good and evil. Morrison stood as a representative to black community, and the community's pride was Morrison. Every person in his life has a journey towards spiritual and non-spiritual, Morrison's journey is around the America, the home land of racism and her journey's destination is to attain anti-racist society and a unique identity for black people. Morrison does not end her novels with the destruction of community but leaves us with an ambiguous expectation of blacks' life to awaken. Thus, like the sun, she revolves around her community to protect, support and to give light to the people of her community and make them shine in the world.

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