

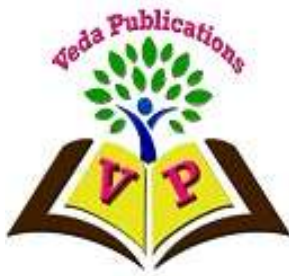


## TONI MORRISON: THE VOICE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

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### ABSTRACT



In this paper the researcher likes to present the gist of the works of Toni Morrison, who is a black African - American novelist. She is one of the most famous literary figures in contemporary African - American Literature. She is the authentic voice of African-American fiction as well as she is a living legend and an Icon of Black Literature. She was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American to win this honour, the eighth woman to win since the Nobel Prize was initiated in 1901. She wrote 11 novels apart from short fiction, drama, a libretto, opera, criticism and books for children. Toni Morrison's writings draw on African-American history, culture and experience, and they have generated sustained interest in the fields of literary criticism, social analysis, and women, human rights, postcolonial, and cultural studies.

**Keywords:** *Self- identity, Historicity, Ethnicity, Race, and Politics; Gender, Sexuality, Psychology, Society and Humanity.*



Toni Morrison's novels explore issues of African-American female identity in stories that integrate elements of the oral traditions, post-modern literary techniques, and magical realism to give voice to the experiences of women living on the margins of the white American society. Toni Morrison's novels have been almost universally praised by many reviewers and critics, and have been the subject of numerous academic books and essays in the fields of gender studies, ethnic studies, and post-modern literary theory and culture studies. Alice Walker, another great African-American writer praised Toni Morrison, when she was given the Nobel Prize:

No one writes more beautifully than Toni Morrison. She has consistently explored issues of true complexity and terror and love in the lives of blacks. Harsh criticism has not dissuaded her. Prizes have not trapped her. She is a writer who deserves this honour (Alice Walker, 1994: 14).

Her stories are amalgamations of historical, magical, supernatural and imaginative elements of the African-Americans' lives. Her stories are gripping, emotional and often based on the oral traditions of the Black American folk narratives. So, in her works, we can re-discover the history of African-Americans and their cultural roots. Toni Morrison's fiction is characterized by its unique way of dealing with the narrative. Instead of using straightforward narration and clear chronology, Toni Morrison often plays with the order of scenes and the ways narration is presented. The narrator may change frequently, or the narrator may be separate from the person through which the reader is currently viewing the action. Yvonne Atkinson described Toni Morrison's use of Black English as central to her narrative voice, asserting,

"Toni Morrison has enveloped the written word in the oral tradition: the use of words from black English and rituals and style of the oral tradition enhance her texts, and the systems of language, the style, and the lexicon of Black English that Toni Morrison uses in her novels bear witness to African-American culture" (Atkinson, 2000: 28).

Her works have been seen not only as exemplifying the struggle of a particular people but also as illustrating the problems and emotions of all human beings. She is admired for her use of language and her interesting narrative voices. Toni Morrison's experiment with narrative voice and language in her

fiction provides possible alternatives to this patriarchal, Western way of telling stories. Toni Morrison helps develop a feminine, African-American language in her fiction. Throughout Toni Morrison's novels, women are the main storytellers, as well as singers. Toni Morrison suggests that African-American feminine language is musical. Toni Morrison believes it is important to represent the storytelling voice of the Griot in her stories so that the reader can hear it. Toni Morrison's use of narrative voice in her novels has several effects on the reader. First of all, the narrative voices are lyrical storytellers, and their narratives replicate the African oral storytelling tradition of the griot.

The aim of the present work is to focus on Re-discovering Multiple Inner Voices in Toni Morrison's Fiction. The selected novels for this paper are *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* and *Paradise*. This paper is a critical appraisal and literary biography of the great African-American writer Toni Morrison and at the same time it offers us the parameters within which she has chosen to work. It also attempts a brief study of the various influences that have shaped her imagination, her art, and her credo as famous American novelist in the history of world literatures.

*The Bluest Eye*, which is the story of three black schoolgirls growing up in Ohio in late 1940s, the sisters Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and their friend Pecola Breedlove. *The Bluest Eye* focuses on Pecola Breedlove, a lonely, young black. Through Pecola, Toni Morrison exposes the power and cruelty of white, middle-class American definitions of beauty, for Pecola will be driven mad by her consuming obsession for white skin and blonde hair—and not just blue eyes, but the bluest ones. A victim of popular white culture and its pervasive advertising, Pecola believes that people would value her more if she weren't black. If she were white, blonde, and very blue-eyed, she would be loved. The events in *The Bluest Eye* are not presented chronologically; instead, they are linked by the voices and memories of two narrators. In the sections labelled with the name of a season, Claudia MacTeer's, retrospective narration as an adult contains her childhood memories about what happened to Pecola. The other narrator, the omniscient narrator, then braids her stories into Claudia's season sections, introducing influential characters and events that shape Pecola's life. *The Bluest Eye* was not a commercial success, but it did fairly well with critics. Neither Toni Morrison nor critics realized that she would become one of the premier novelists of her time. But that



barely mattered for Toni Morrison, who had discovered her magic.

Song of Solomon is an in-depth study of Toni Morrison's most popular novel which featured on the front page of The New York Times Book Review and won the National Book Critics Award for fiction in 1978. Song of Solomon explores the different issues and experiences of African-American cultural heritage as well as traditions. The story of a Black man's search for his identity through a discovery of his family history, Song of Solomon has been especially admired for the beauty of its language and its grounding of universal themes in the particularity of the African-American experience, as well as for its use of folklore. In Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison uses traditional narrative about a young man growing into wisdom. *Beloved*, a remarkable novel, which deals with slavery and also illustrates the problems and emotions of all human beings. *Beloved* probes the most painful part of the African-American heritage, slavery, by way of what she has called "re-memory" deliberately reconstructing what has been forgotten. Of all Toni Morrison's novels, *Beloved* puzzles us most; the style is remarkably sophisticated. Through flashbacks to past tragedies and deeply symbolic delineations of continued emotional and psychological suffering, the novel explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman and her family during the reconstruction era. Using flashbacks, fragmented narration and shifting view points, Toni Morrison explores the story of the events that had led to the protagonist Sethe's crime. Toni Morrison's novels explore issues of African-American female identity in stories that integrate elements of the oral traditions, post-modern literary techniques, and magical realism to give a narrative voice to experiences of women living on the margins of the white American society.

**Jazz:** The Music of Life, analyses Toni Morrison's sixth novel *Jazz*, a multifaceted narrative, evolving from the early twentieth-century migration to New York of a unhappy uncomplicated Southern couple. *Jazz* by Toni Morrison is a novel that holds the readers interest with mystery and love. Joe and Violet came to Harlem with hopes, aspirations and a vision for a new role where they can find their true identity and discover their own selves. The unexpected stresses of the city, however, complicate their lives. The novel deliberately mirrors the jazz music itself concerning the composition which seems to be free and unpredictable. *Jazz* is narrated by an alternately objective, omniscient, and confused voice that reveals the consciousnesses and personal histories of the characters and their historic setting,

and also gives the novel its improvisatory, jazz-like feel. In effect, jazz is the mysterious narrator of the novel. The novel also utilizes the call-and-response style of jazz music, allowing the characters to explore the same events from different perspectives. Music, language, and narrative come together in *Jazz*, and their interplay provides the real dynamic in the text.

**Paradise:** is Toni Morrison's seventh novel the last one in a trilogy that includes *Beloved* and *Jazz*. *Paradise* was the first novel after Toni Morrison was awarded with the Nobel Prize. The original title of the book was supposed to be *War* but was later changed to *Paradise* by Toni Morrison's editor. *Paradise* continues Toni Morrison's long-standing project of memorializing (or remembering) details of African-American history that have been ignored by mainstream accounts of what it is to be American. *Paradise* seek to filling gaps in the American "grand narrative" of history but it examines the process of re-creating "grand narratives" in its depiction of the town of Ruby. According to Ron David (Toni Morrison explained 2000: 154-55) *Paradise* is two separate books that overlap occasionally until they meet tragically at the end. One book is the story of the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma – its citizens, its founders, its reason for being, and the difficulties it has trying to maintain its identity as it heads into the 1970s. The "other" book is the story of the place called the Convent and the five women who meet and die there. Toni Morrison's novel tells us why the men feel that their *Paradise* is threatened by the women (Ron David, 2000: 154-55). The novel's title points to one of the book's most important themes: the search for a personal paradise. Characters seek their paradise in the towns and in the Convent, with varying degrees of success. The book comments on the nature of paradise, and what it takes for someone to be truly happy. In many of her novels, Toni Morrison makes use of shifting consciousnesses, multiple narrative voices and perspectives, and the technique of free indirect discourse in which the narrative slips and slides from one consciousness to another without clear indication. The multiple storytellers and voices change constantly and without warning. The reader must be attentive to all of these voices in order to create meaningful connections.

#### CONCLUSION

In summing up, the researcher likes to say that Toni Morrison has created highly structured designs of stories with folklore embeddings which have always been an integral aspect of black imagination. Though she has produced novels of uncommon realism using surrealistic settings filled



with characters having psychic and spiritual perceptions, her strong sense of place and rootedness are prominent. In her novels, she has celebrated the rich folk heritage, language and traditional values of the black community threatened by a predominantly white society. She has been particularly attentive to the ancestral female as culture-bearer and the restless male as cultural pathfinder. Her folk-aesthetic reconstructs the folk community through the oral traditions of storytelling and her inconclusive endings draw readers into the participatory experience of communal storytelling. In utilizing the linguistic-cultural heritage of African-Americans, she reveals a love of language and language play, and a capacity to use it creatively. That's why in the award citation, the Nobel Committee of Swedish Academy called Toni Morrison, "a literary artist of the finest work", and "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality."

The researcher in this paper has confined himself to the study of 5 novels of Toni Morrison with reference to the critical analysis of themes, devices, narrative voices and narrative techniques with focus on the use of surrealistic settings. Toni Morrison has projected the rich folk heritage, language and folk-aesthetics values. But many factors of change have led to the loss of this tradition. This paper may help those who wish to learn the impact of the advent of Christianity and Western liberal education on the oral traditions of Afro-American people. The works of Toni Morrison touch the readers from India and encourage our writers to explore the possibilities to research and reclaim their own heritage and culture like the writings of MahaSweta Devi.

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