



## Narrating the Ordeals: A Study of African American Women Writings with Special Reference to Toni Morrison

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**Abstract:** The problem of inequality, racial discrimination and classism has concern of various committed writers and has been a part of their scholarly endeavours. African Americans, though free, were deprived of every semblance of equality within the political system in America. DuBois rightly argued that the problem of African American is the problem of colour line. This paper is concerned with the exploration of black women's ordeals delineated by Black women writers with specific reference to Toni Morrison.

It examines role of family, their cultural heritage, racial discrimination and role of self image in black women's suffering.

**Key words:** Oppression; Racism; Inequality, Violence.

ISSN 2454-308X



### Introduction:

Men and women all over the world irrespective of their differences in nationality, race, religion, and colour are governed by more or less the same feeling and passions. Hence the inequality existing between men and women, between races and nations has not remained a matter of scholarly interest but it becomes everyone's concern.

One's experience, expectations, yearning, dilemmas and hopes to look at the world through a literary work in a different light with intention of creating better, prosperous and more peaceful world stands to be acknowledged as creative. Such work not only attracts the attention of the people but it earns their approval and appreciation of the people. The great legends, in whichever language they have been written, stand testimony to this with their deep concern for mankind and its betterment.

Though living in democratic country, the demand of the African American to be treated as an equal, still remains a distant dream. Though generations of Americans, right from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century, have "sought to create a social order" with "equality and justice, as they understood it," extending the benefits of equality and justice to the African American has always been slippery. (Franklyn, 3) It is a fact that various congresses right from the first through Sixteenth made certain that the African Americans though free were deprived "every semblance of equality within and the political system . . . a man not only had to be free, but also white, in order to enjoy equality or even to aspire for it." (Franklyn, 26)

The problem of the African American is the problem of color line as mentioned by William E.B. Bois in 1902. In an environment impaired by centuries of violent oppression, inequality and injustice, the reaction of the African American is natural. Their anger against inequality and injustice is their righteous annoyance.

The problem of inequality and racial discrimination has an impact on several writers like William DuBois, Claude McKay, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison on the one hand and women writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker on the other. Their novels have been written with specific social purpose. The trying circumstances make the novels of African Americans like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison especially relevant with their graphic details. The novels of Toni Morrison written about three decades later become equally significant by representing the plight of African



American women. Shockingly for them, their tormentors are their own men who join those other external, traditional, non African American oppressor make an integral part of their novels.

Marry Wollstonecraft, an English woman; in her pioneering essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) addressed the rightful place of women in society as asserted by Judith as her “work was widely influential in America . . . and helped to spearhead the anti slavery and the women’s rights movements in America in the nineteenth century.” (29) Elizabeth Stanton was one of the best known advocates for equality of women during the nineteenth century and at the end of century Charlotte Perkins Gilman championed the economic independence of women. Hence, even during the nineteenth century, many feminists fought for political freedom, the right to vote, equality before law, economic independence and reproductive freedom.

The early twentieth century had women’s suffrage as its primary objective, resulting in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the American constitution assuming the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any States on account of sex. During the decade of great depression, in the 1930s many states legally prohibited married women from working, and “the middle class woman who wished to work was an anomaly and was seen to be acting against her social status and the dominant cultural norms of her day.” (Judith, 29)

The contribution of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice walker has to be seen in this background, though writers like Richard Wright have highlighted the oppressive plight of African American women in his novella *Long Black Song* (1938) and has presented Sue, a female protagonist in *Bright and Morning Star* (1940), as an exemplary woman, fighting for the downtrodden and sacrificing hr life in the cause. Toni Morrison, one of the most significant African American writers and Nobel Laureates, was born almost a quarter of a century later than Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970 and it is to be realized that even a quarter of a century after Wright’s and Ellison’s works were published, not much has changed in the conditions of the exploited African Americans women.

Self image of an individual is major pillar in the development of a child into a well balanced individual in any society. Morrison’s father was responsible for imbining a positive self image in his daughter, preventing her from acquiring “the zero image,” (Samual & Hudson, ix) a negative definition of self commonly associated with oppressed peoples and familiar to black children. Her positive self image makes Toni Morrison choose to reveal the ordeals faced by African American women through her novels.

Morrison’s concern is not racism, and she does not bother being called ‘racist’; but her concern is the oppressive conditions thrust on her protagonists, and the traumatic effect caused by such oppression. As a woman in general and African American in particular, Morrison “examines problems of race and gender oppression before exploring class contradictions within the race.” (Mbalia, 9)

The oppressive world portrayed by Morrison shows the loss of identity of the African American and their quest for establishing their identity. Pain, horror, violence and crime are not uncommon but rather the order of the day in the life of the African American. In this world of oppression, the African American women remain more exploited, violated and oppressed. To survive in such a world, Morrison’s “protagonist must somehow violate the rule of the oppressive system, reject the values it venerates, and recover the human potential denied to blacks.” (Otten, 1)

Morrison’s novels reveal not only her evolution as a writer but also her growing concern for the African American in general and the African American women in particular. Mbalia categorises her concern as:

In each of her novels, Morrison explores some aspect of and/ or solution to the oppression afflicting African people. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) examines racism; *Sula* (1973), gender



oppression; *Song of Solomon*, the necessity of knowing one's family, community and heritage; *Tar Baby*, the class contradictions that keep African people divided; and *Beloved*, the solution that will help solve the class exploitation and racial oppression of African people. (9)

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) has its inspiration from an earlier short story by her about a little African American girl, who longed for blue eyes. This theme has been developed later into highly thought provoking novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The novel speaks at length on the problem of the forced imposition of the zero image on the African American children, especially the girls. As Mbalia asserted:

The thesis of the novel is that racism devastates the self- image of the African female in general and the African female child in particular. (28)

Morrison identifies the emotional violence heaped upon children by parents as a special concern, which she sets out to explore in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The lack of love that shatters a family, the misfortune of being born in a sort of 'hate' family, a family which has the perception of ugliness without a question and the denial of self-love, all these contribute to make Pecola's tragedy the worst being. Pecola Breedlove's negative conception of self as ugly derives her to the peripheral existence in the society in which she survives, 'Being a minority in both caste and class, we [Breedlove family] moved away about any way on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hand on, or creep singly up into the major fold of the garment' (Morrison, 11). This negative conception about herself is rooted in her emotional, verbal and physical humiliation by her family and the society. Thus, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) also throws light on the problem of self image and child abuse afflicting the African American female.

In her second novel, *Sula* (1973), Morrison "turns her attention to securing individual's rights in general and women's rights in particular." (Mbalia, 20) *Sula* (1973) is continuation of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and has taken up from where *The Bluest Eye* (1970) has left off as pointed out by Mbalia as, "when *Sula* opens, the heroine is the twelve year old Pecola, isolated and oppressed." (25)

*Sula* Peace comes off a family who has learnt to live hard, in ways others cannot even imagine. The creator and sovereign of this family is Eva Peace, who according to somebody stuck one of her legs under train and made them pay off! *Sula* rejects the traditional role ascribed to women, to get married and settled down, telling Eva, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." Probably here Morrison tries to infuse the idea of individual or gender freedom as the African's solution.

*Sula* is different from the others from the very beginning in that she will not tolerate harassment or oppression. She grows up as a tough girl. Her rebellious nature makes her unpopular and she is unforgivable in the opinion of the people of Medallion, and *Sula* becomes an outcast and untouchable when return back as, "A little boy ran up to her saying, "Carry yo' bag, ma'am?" Before *Sula* could answer his mother had called him, "You, John. Get back in here." (Morrison, 91) As Mbalia asserts that by developing two female characters, *Sula* and Nel, neither of whom is complete in herself, "Morrison chooses to explore the nature of women's oppression" (40) in a unique way. *Sula* remains independent till she breathes her last. *Sula*'s last, final moment on this earth is touching:

Then she realized or rather sensed that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. (Morrison, 149)

"She was not breathing because she didn't have to," seems to suggest that the total freedom, the freedom even from breathing is available to the African American woman, only when she ceases to be, only when she is clinically dead! Barbara Christian remarks:



*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* teach us a lesson about the integral relationship between the destructive limits imposed on the Black woman and the inversion of truth in this society. (179)

In her, *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison has reached a well marked stage in her development as a writer. *Tar Baby* shows the white and the African American in different light. The novel differs from the previous ones by its setting which is outside American continent. *Tar Baby* (1981) traces the ill effects of cultural alienation on Jadine, the protagonist. Jadine does not hesitate to accept the white culture. Because she had lost her parent at the age of 12, and had a break from her traditions and culture. Ondine and Sydney, her uncle and aunt, and care taker, widened this gap by sending her to the boarding school in a European culture. The adult Jadine feels equipped with white culture and considers her a part of it and African American culture is alien to her. Morrison exposed African American's repulsion for their own people as Jadine calls them "nigger" surrogates the role of the white tormentor. Son, the hero of the novel "is from the beginning a wanderer in search of self." (Otten, 77)

Thus, Morrison's novels reveal that oppression is not confined just to one race, age group or sex, resulting in violence, hatred and the blindness to recognize truth and the practical realities. Her novels reveal the plight of women from Pecola to Sula and Jadine's inability to give up her ancestry leaving her in an unenviable plight. In other words, Morrison portrays a transition of her women – from zero image to independent individuality – a portrayal showing her deep concern for women.

The novels of Toni Morrison emphasize that the deliverance for the oppressed must come from within. Even though it is a fact that oppression exists even today, the silver line is that there is a positive attitudinal change in the American mindset and the attitude of the world community as a whole, giving one hope that inequality, injustice and oppression will vanish one day and a peaceful world will be created by means of non-violence.

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