

## Major Thematic Concerns in the Works of Toni Morrison

---

**Dr. Archana**

Associate Professor of English

Govt. College, Safidon.

---

### Abstract

Toni Morrison, the first African American women writer to win Nobel Prize for Literature, is one of the prominent black writers. Like any other black writer who owes a sense of responsibility towards her race, Morrison's works reflect racial as well as gender consciousness. Morrison analyses the position of black people in racially prejudiced American society and their representation in literary works written by the whites. She discovers, to her horror and dismay, that the blacks are rendered invisible, not only socially but also in matter of literary treatment. This paper aims at exploring the major thematic concerns, in her works, fiction as well as non-fiction.

**Keywords:** Racism, Sexism, Operation, Exploitation, Ethnic Community, Cultural Values.

Toni Morrison, herself being a part of black race, has an added advantage of knowing the response and reaction of black people to their peculiar situation in American society. She asserts the importance of black people and emphasises that their presence must be acknowledged. She is of the view that if literature is really to become a reflection of life, then a comprehensive picture of American life showing the whites as well as the blacks should be presented in literary works. She observes, "The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of literary imagination."<sup>1</sup> Hence her focus on the issues pertaining to the lives of black people. She says in an interview, "When I view the world, perceive it, and write about it, it's the world of black people. It's not that I won't write about white people. I just know that when I'm trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest those themes for me are the black people whom I invent."<sup>2</sup> In this context. Raymond Williams has stated that literature is part of "a whole social process which as it is lived, is not only process, but is an active history made-up of the realities of formation and of struggle."<sup>3</sup> This is quite true of and applicable to the works of Toni Morrison. Her works depict the bitter realities and struggle of black people. Her themes, though related to black people, are varied as she deals with the racial discrimination and its adverse impact on the blacks, suffering and struggle of women, importance of cultural history, and knowledge of one's past, relation of individual and

---

community, Black music, importance of ethnic community etc.

One important characteristic of Morrison's works is that she gets into the skin of her characters and lets them speak through her pen. She tries to see the world from their eyes, from their perspective. As she tells in an interview, "My work is to become those characters in a limited way, to see what they see, not what I see."<sup>4</sup> She has been appreciated not only as a conscious thinker but also as a great craftswoman. Her works has had been appreciated for lyrical language and the use of African myths and folklore. Gurleen Grewal points out, "Morrison takes the novel home to the intimate addresses of the rural and urban African-American tradition from which she come, back to the Blues with its long-standing tradition of voicing pain, registering complaint and comfort."<sup>5</sup> Morrison uses her literary art excellently, not only to assert the black presence forcefully, but also to register the struggles of black people for dignified existence. Her works rise about topicality to universal level, as the Black represent all the downtrodden underprivileged people.

Writing the literature of protest, Morrison depicts how the evolution of a black American is marked by racial prejudices which hamper his development into a wholesome human being. This discrimination, on the basis of colour produces in the blacks a complex psychological conflict with varied implications. A negro is considered a man without character or values, a mere object to be used and kept on social margins. Explaining the working of dominant social system, Joel Koval states, "Racism abstracts the colour of the living body into non- colours of extreme value, black and white. Within this organisation, black represents the shade of evil, the devil's aspect, night, separations loneliness, dirt...and white represents the mark of good, the token of innocence, purity, cleanliness, spirituality, virtue, and hope."<sup>6</sup> The attitude of the white Americans towards the blacks is conditioned and governed by these notions. A black is reduced to be a 'nigger' which is a nightmarish illusion that instructs a person to become something undesirable, to eschew something creditable, to imitate negation. Nirmal Bajaj adds, "The word 'nigger' has tended to block off all avenues of thought, not only in the mind of an individual, but the whole community of blacks."<sup>7</sup>

Morrison clearly depicts how racism plays a determining and decisive role in the oppression of Afro- Americans. It can be further illustrated with the help of Sartre's concept of the 'look'. According to Sartre, 'look' has a defining quality about it. The way people look at you defines your image, identity and worth. In American society, the way white people look at blacks has serious implications. The 'look' of white people defines the blacks as inferior and depraved and worthless. This 'look' of white people obviously has devastating impact on the psyche of black people as it defines them mentally inferior, aesthetically incapable and spiritually barren. The 'look' of white people creates an air of scorn and rejection of the blacks. It comes as a blow for the blacks as their very existence is being rejected. The situation is beautifully and poignantly represented by Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, where the black protagonist is rendered invisible because white people simply refuse to see him, to acknowledge his existence. It is his colour that thwarts his recognition as a human being. Hazel E Barnes explains, "The 'Look' identifies me with my external acts and appearances with myself or others. It threatens by ignoring my free subjectivity, to reduce me to the status of a thing in the

---

world... It reveals my physical and psychic vulnerability, my fragility. My vulnerability lies in my response to the 'look'. As I do so with either shame or pride.”<sup>8</sup> Therein lies the crucial element. When the response is shame, it is detrimental because it is shame of the self, overpowered by the look. But when the response is pride, the blacks are able to overcome the negatives of the whites about them. This pride affirms their being, their existence, and this pride gives them courage to face racial discrimination. It also provides them motivation to move further in the direction of their well-being as well as advancement. And this pride stems from their being rooted in and proud of their cultural heritage as Langston Hughes does in *The Negro Speaks of the River*.

Talking about racial discrimination in literary circles, Morrison points out that the presence of Afro- American writers for centuries has not been even acknowledged by the white writers. The definition of “Americanness” excludes the black experience. In her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison states that “traditional canonical, American literature, is free of uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African- Americans in the United States.”<sup>9</sup> According to Morrison, “Americanness is separate from and unaccountable to this presence.” Highlighting the fact that if American literature is to be truly national and complete in itself, black experience must be included in it, she says “The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.”<sup>10</sup> Morrison is also aware of a fabricated brand of Africanism that has been deliberately propagated by the white writers. But it is a hackneyed concept as it only includes the concept of Africanism from the perspective of white writers. Giving a befitting reply to those critics who in their overemphasis on universality, criticises black writers who give voice to their racial consciousness and issues pertaining to their race, she says, “It is important to see how inextricable Africanism is, or ought to be, from the deliberations of literary criticism and the wanton, elaborate strategies undertaken to erase its presence from view.”<sup>11</sup> Not only this, Morrison advocates study of racial prejudice not only on blacks, but also on the whites who perpetrated it. She is of the view that a serious intellectual effort that explores the impact of racial ideology on the mind, imagination and behaviours of whites is equally valuable.

Morrison explores in her first work, the obsession of blacks with an American standard of beauty that seems both inescapable and destructive. *The Bluest Eye* is a tragic tale about a young black girl's desire for the bluest eyes, the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful and therefore worthy in society. The central idea in the novel is the domination of blacks by the existing American standards of beauty- blue eyes, blonde hair and white skin. It deals honestly and sensitively with the damaging influence of white standards and values on the lives of black people. It portrays in poignant terms the tragic conditions of blacks in a racist America. It examines how the ideology is perpetrated by the institutions controlled by the dominant group influence the self-image of black women. By doing so, it exposes the devastation caused by white cultural domination in the lives of African Americans. In order to propagate its parameters of beauty, the dominant culture makes use of different apparatus like media icons

and advertisements. The dominant criterion of beauty is seeped in the psyche of the protagonist through her interaction with her social cultural environment. Describing such influence, Claudia, the narrator of the story, says, "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue eyed, yellow haired, pink skin doll was what every girl treasured. 'Here' they said, 'this is beautiful.'"(p.14). In such an environment where everything and everyone proclaims the superiority of the white, a young child like Pecola is very likely to imbibe the prevalent notion that white and everything associated with white is beautiful. This internalisation of prevalent standards of beauty is reflected in Pecola's excessive liking of Shirley Temple mug and Mary Jane candies. At this stage of their development, the young girls fail to understand the motivation behind creation of such discriminatory standards of beauty. Pecola's mental horizon is not so broad and as to understand the subtle implications and bearing of such standards on the development of her personality. That is why she is so greatly influenced by these standards of the dominant group and makes no attempt to shield herself from such self-deprecating standards. Elaborating on the issue, Morrison herself says, "When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned on how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble...The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world, and we should have nothing to do with it."<sup>12</sup>

Morrison has been vocal about the issues of black women. The sufferings of black women in patriarchal and racially prejudiced society, their struggle for survival and development, their desire to establish an identity of their own and the obstacles they face, their vulnerability to racial notions and their reactions (in some cases) to such discriminatory notions have been taken up by Morrison in her works. In *Sula*, Morrison captures most profoundly the ways concept of good and evil are related to societal definitions of women. For black women, racial discrimination is a basic and bitter reality, but gender discrimination is equally pervasive in their lives, and in this way, they find themselves being victimised by dual forces of racism and sexism. Black women not only bear the brunt of racism, but are also doubly victimised by white as well as black men. The condition of black women is aptly explained by Gloria Wade-Gales through the imagery of circles:

There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Away from it there is a smaller circle a narrow space in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in the second circle is a third small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America.<sup>13</sup>

It is against this background that *Sula's* struggle for identity has to be analysed and understood. In the process of her evolution, she becomes aware of secondary position of women in her community as well as in larger society. This kind of awareness can evoke two types of responses- either submission or radical departure from the conventions. *Sula* chooses the later one. She rejects all behavioural norms laid down by her community and evolves her own norms of behaviour which are governed by her spirit of individualism. She is motivated by

---

a strong sense of me-ness. She refuses to fit into the traditional feminine mould because she finds the role fixed for women very limiting and suffocating. As Naana Banyiwah-Horne points out, "Sula's values are often the polar opposites of those adopted by her provincial society. She rejects those values that aim at uniformity and stifle the self."<sup>14</sup>

Sula fully understands the norms and conventions of her community and deliberately rejects them because these leave no scope of development of a woman. As K. Sumana observes, "Sula openly challenges the limitations imposed on her individuality and, much to the consternation of the community, vengefully disregards time, honoured conventions and tradition."<sup>15</sup> She realises that she is a part of that community that believes that any attempt by a woman to nurture herself amounts to selfishness. The concept of individual identity of a woman simply does not exist in her community. Her community does not allow her the freedom to create herself as a woman is meant to create someone else. The black community does not allow a woman the right to shun away from her primary function and develop an independent identity of her own for the fear that if she succeeds in doing so, she will no longer remain subservient to the patriarchal setup. Consequently, it can jeopardise the stability of established norms.

Though Morrison is a votary of women's freedom and rights she advocates rootedness in one's ethnic community with equal force. Though she strongly advocates women's freedom to develop and define themselves, she does not approve of extreme individualism. She is of the view that if in the process of development, a person gets alienated from her ethnic community, her development can't be said to be complete. As she points out, "A definition of self that excludes an ethnic cultural connection will, for minority ethnic women finally be empty and meaningless."<sup>16</sup> Sula knows all there is to know about herself because she examines herself and she is experimental with herself. But she has trouble making a connection with other people and just feeling that lovely sense of accomplishment, of being closed in a very strong way. In this manner, Morrison validates the importance of connectivity to one's cultural mores in one's evolution. Morrison allows her female protagonists to speak out against their oppression. But she does not condone their existentialist position. When her protagonists questioned the roles traditionally played by black women, she does not allow them to belittle the role played by these women. She makes her position clear in *Tar Baby*.

Jadine, the protagonist has a graduate degree from the Sorbonne. She's a successful model. She lives an upper class European lifestyle. She has none of the encumbrances of husband, home and family. She is the contemporary "liberated" woman. She considers the role played by older black women as backward. She sees no self fulfilling value in the roles they have served. But Morrison suggests that for black women whose ethnic group and culture has been discriminated against by the larger society "liberation" must not bring with it alienation from the ethnic community. That is why, rather than glorifying Jadine's success, Morrison centres the conflict in the novel around her unwillingness to accept the alliance with her cultural tradition. Jadine is constantly haunted by a sense of having lost a connection to the values and traditions of the black women of her past. In the novel, the African woman in yellow spits at her during a shopping trip in Paris. The night women of her dreams taunt her, and her aunt

expresses shame and disappointment over her lack of concern for her family. Here Morrison emphasises the point that educated women like Janine should not forget the positive connection that they have to the women of their ethnic past. Morrison calls the historic ability of black women to keep their families and their households together the “tar quality”. And it is in the development of these tar women that Morrison herself engages in the kind of ethnic, cultural feminism that she advocates.

In *Song of Solomon* Pilate is Morrison’s tar woman incarnate. She raises and provides for her daughter and granddaughter alone. She helps the weak and saves those in trouble. Her home offers genuine comfort. Her allegiance is to the women and men of her past and the values that daughter. She has no concern for the artificial standards set presently by her own community or by the larger society. In a essence, her values are like those of all tar women, a caring concern for home, family, and community. Pilate simply adheres to these values in a way that is historically and culturally uncompromising.

Thus, Toni Morrison with her commitment to her people and her aesthetic responsibility to her art of fiction, sensitively documents the oppression and exploitation of black people and factors responsible for it. Her novels document the author’s awareness and concern for the historical conditions that sparked the national struggle of African people against subjugation and exploitation, thereby revealing her heightened consciousness of the interrelationship of race, gender and class. In the face of against these forces she reinforces the importance of being rooted to the black ethnic community. She does not approve of extreme individualism and is in favour of a balance between individual aspirations and allegiance to cultural values. Exposing the biased attitude of critics, she lays bare the deliberate scholarly indifference towards treatment of black people in literary works. Highlighting the presence of a fabricated American brand of Africanism prevalent in American and Eurocentric criticism, she advocates the inclusion of black experiences in the writing of literature. Hence her focus on problems and issues pertaining to the lives of black people.

## References

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*. ( London, Harvard University Press, 1992),p. 5.
- Toni Morrison. Interview with Claudia Tate, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed.Danille Taylor Guthrie( Mississippi : University Press of Mississippi, 1994),p.157.
- Ibid, p.37.
- NellieMckay, “ An interview with Toni Morrison,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor Guthrie, p.149.
- Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle* ( Louisiana : Louisiana State University Press, 1998), Page 1.
- Joel Koval, quoted in K. Sumana, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: A Study in Race, Gender, and Class* ( New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1998),p. 50.

- Nirmal Bajaj, Search for Identity in Black Poetry (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1990), p.8.
- Hazel and Barnes, quoted in Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems, Toni Morrison (New York : Twayne Publishers, 1990),p. 17.
- Toni Morrison, p. 5.
- Ibid, p.5.
- Ibid, p.9
- K. Sumana, p.52.
- Gloria Wade-Gales, No Crystal Stairs: Vision of Race and Sex in Black Women's  
○ Fiction ( New York : The Pilgrim Press, 1984),p.3.
- Naana Banyiwah-Horne, quoted in K. Sumana, p 73.
- K. Sumana, p. 73.
- Morrison, quoted in Carolyn Denard, "The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," Critical Essays on Toni Morrison, ed. Nellie McKay ( Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), p.174.