The Colour Divide in Toni Morrison's Selected Works

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to examine the issues of marginalization on the basis of colour in the backdrop of American society in some selected works of Toni Morrison. Colours being a concern to the black writer, her fictional works are deep rooted in issues dealing with Blacks in America who are subjected, exploited and economically deprived. Morrison in her works deal with the African American community, who have suffered through generations of suppression and exploitation even after slave laws were removed and technically blacks and whites enjoyed equality. The American psyche is a culture construct and centuries of subjugation, discrimination and economic deprivation has imposed upon the blacks a sense of inferiority, predestined to suffer and resentment for the whites. This paper is an attempt to discuss these issues in selected works of Toni Morrison.

Keywords: Racism, colour, discrimination, marginality

Introduction

Toni Morrison is a product that has been historically and culturally subjected to racism and marginalization. Morrison speaks from the standpoint of a black woman in America where the repression and subjugation of African Americans through centuries has proceeded along the lines of cultural imperialism. The writer here interrogates and documents white America's representation of race and gender. Her novels depict conflicts that are extreme expressions of the double consciousness possessed by women and African Americans.

Discussion

Marginality implies exclusion from the centre and it creates a liminal space where the marginalized are voiceless subalterns dispossessed of history. Morrison's works represent the experience of the African Americans who have been displaced from their homeland and being made to go through traumatic slavery and in the

process of their displacement discriminated on the basis of their colour and gender. The African Americans suffered generations of exploitation and discrimination even after slave laws were removed and technically blacks and whites enjoyed equality. This culture construct of subjugation and deprivation created a sense of inferiority, predestined to suffer and resentment for the whites. Morrison through her novels narrates the African American experience in the hands of the whites. Reclaiming an identity has been important to the black writer after suffering centuries of dispossession and misrepresentation. Morrison through her narratives make an attempt to reclaim the voice which have been denied to them by imperialism and racism. Morrison's novels centre on the vulnerability of their existence as an oppressed class. Though America is generally regarded as a free country, the demand of the African American to be treated equally still remains a dream.

Racism as defined by Calvin C. Hernton as, “all of the learned behaviour of learned emotions of the part of a group of people towards another group whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group; behaviour and emotions that compel one group to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if it did not belong to the human race” (Hernton, 1965, p.175). The basic myth of racism is that white skin brings with it cultural superiority, that this race is more intelligent than the blacks by the mere fact of being white. Psychologically whiteness is equated with beauty and culture and blackness with ugliness and slavery. Racism started in America when the white masters of the land brought the first Africans in chains around the 1600s and made use of their labour to enrich their empire. Race is considered as a natural expression of one’s fundamental identity. But race is a social construct and like gender, it is a modern invention which continues to be one of the principal ways by which we identify each other.

Toni Morrison’s novels bring out race oppression. Her novel *Tar Baby* brings out a certain class system where Valerian Street is a corporate mogul a slave owner who has a greenhouse and claims his desire is to control life, “I was named after an emperor” (Morrison, 2004, p.146). His household represents a microcosm of the class barriers that have existed in American society for many centuries. Morrison in this novel narrates how the exploitation of one group by the other gives birth to racism. Morrison’s fictional world is predominantly African American. The author in *The Bluest Eye* gained attention for her powerful and richly expressive depiction of the vitality of African Americans. *The Bluest Eye*, set in a small town in Lorain Ohio in the 1940s, is a testimony of Morrison’s deep interest in the lives, culture and poverty faced by the blacks. The novel is about Pecola Breedlove who has been victimized by her parents, raped by her father Cholly Breedlove and also suffered at the hands of her community as well which results in her retreating to insanity. The novel is about the desire of an eleven year old African American from a

dysfunctional and poverty stricken family for blue eyes which she believes will make her beautiful is symbolic of the conflict between the culture of the whites and the blacks and how it affects the psyche of the people within these cultures.

White racism is the root cause of Pecola’s self-hatred. It is the result of the society imposing the standard of beauty on everyone including the blacks. Pecola is embarrassed and ashamed when Mr.Yacobowski does not see her and identifying his look with one that she sees in the eyes of all white people, she decides, “The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (Morrison, 1999, p.37). The girl who once equates herself with dandelions changes her focus to negativity for she sees in their white skin and yellow hair the colours of her obsession as well as those of Mr.Yacobowski’s rejection. Moreover, the absence of black dolls and the presence of white dolls is partly responsible for what makes Pecola invisible. Pecola in perceiving herself as ugly and which others also see as well, wishes and even prays to disappear, “Please God...Please make me disappear” (Morrison, 1999, p.33). Not only Pecola but Pauline Breedlove’s unhappy life is determined by the absence of a tooth rather than the presence, of the crippled foot for which she blames for misfortunes. Pecola inability to conform to white standards of beauty as represented by Shirley Temple contributes to her loss of sanity. Rather than a cry or a word, there is silence, only the “hollow suck of air in the back of her throat” (Morrison, 1999, p.128). When Pecola is raped by her father, the deprivation of the Dick and Jane reader image of the pretty green and white house with the red door is the cause rather than the effect of historical suffering.

Pecola believes that blue eyes will make her beautiful and give her the love and acceptance which is missing from her life, “it has occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, knew the sights-if those

eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (Morrison, 1999, p.34). She believes that having blue eyes will also make her parents love her which is absent from her life. Pecola suffers from identity crises when she becomes a victim to the standards of beauty set by an American society that of a white woman with white skin and yellow hair.

Pecola’s victimization is a result of both racism and also from interracial conflicts related to colour. The damage inflicted on Pecola comes from those black adults who themselves have been a victim in the hands of other whites. Pecola experiences the most intra-racial prejudices at the hands of her abusive parents. As parents Cholly Breedlove and Pauline failed to provide love, security and identity that are considered to be essential for a healthy growth.

Toni Morrison dedicates *Beloved* to the “Sixty million and more” African people who died on the passage from Africa to America. African Americans were treated in the most inhuman way, “men and women were moved around like checkers...hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (Morrison, 2005, p.23-24). The blacks were forbidden to marry without the consent of their white masters, the women belonged to the slave masters, were considered to be the property of their masters and bore mulatto children. The black women were made to breed children so as to increase the slaves of the white masters. Morrison in this novel narrates the experiences of slavery through her characters and its devastating consequences. The novel centred on Sethe and how she protects her children from the white master by killing them. Repeatedly raped by her white masters she would not let her children suffer the same fate, “collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and carried, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them...I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison, 2005, p.192-193).

Paul D like Sethe carries his share of traumatic memories from not remembering his mother or father to being punished where his tongue was held down by an iron and his hands chained behind in his attempt to escape from the plantation. He was further tied to forty-six other Negroes during his period of enslavement where he put up with “anything and everything just to stay alive” (Morrison, 2005, p.221). Baby Suggs has nothing left intact in her body except her brave heart for slave life had, “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue” (Morrison, 2005, p.87). Baby Suggs cannot reconcile with the fact that white men are still allowed to barge into her yard any time, which violates that sanctity of her privacy and safety of her house. She painfully realizes that there is nothing left for a black to do but only bear everything done by the whites. Despite getting freedom, bought by her son, she dies of heartbreak caused by the whites and is “buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite” (Morrison, 2005, p.202). Baby Suggs goes on to say that there is no bad luck in the world but white folk. *Beloved* narrates how the blacks had to live without identities because as one slave master says “definitions belonged to the definers-not the defined” (Morrison, 2005, p.225). All these taken together brings out the horror of slavery.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison through her novels admits that race determines how one is perceived by the world. Race to her is inextricable from the question of what it means and how it feels to be an individual in a particular time and place. Thus, the author through her works tries to break the unspoken ideal of whiteness by offering her approach to blackness.

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