

Issues of Human Rights in the Novels of Toni Morrison

(With Special Reference to the Bluest Eye, Sula and Beloved)

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Abstract

Toni Morrison deals with the themes of love and friendship, search for identity, concept of beauty and ugliness, and life and death in her novels. Her heroines and heroes struggle to understand all the better aspects of the human conditions. The theme which is common in her novels is alienation. Alienation proves to be a devastating phenomenon for the Black women in America. Being away from their own land, they are tied with the chains of slavery. The Black women are portrayed as breeding women, maids and domestic workers. Black women are viewed and treated just as the commodities to be handled by the white masters. They were not allowed to have any human rights whatsoever. But their white masters have all rights over them. They are forced to live in a set-up which is full of racism and sexism, which result in alienation.

The paper is a theoretical study of the various issues of human rights in the novels of the famous Afro-American novelist Toni Morrison who raises the issues of class-antagonism and human rights in each of her novels. The paper covers the salient features of Morrison's characterization, cites instances of the violation of human rights of the black women created in her novels.

Keywords: Alienation, Class-Antagonism, Racism, Self, Identity, Slavery, Destiny.

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948 is a significant milestone in the development of the human race. The Declaration, consisting of the Preamble and thirty articles, was adopted unanimously in the aftermath of World War II, and since then, has been the cornerstone of discussions about the fundamental rights of all persons born into the human race. However except for the solitary reference to "old age" there was no formal mention of the human rights of the elderly in the UDHR till the 1969 Declaration on Social Progress and Development.

The real life and the life in the fiction reveal that the human rights that are meant to be exercised by every individual on earth irrespective of caste, class, sex or race, are openly violated. The depiction of the characters in the novels of Toni Morrison too witnesses it.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, essayist, editor, teacher, and professor emeritus at Princeton University. She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved*. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. In 1996, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected her for the Jefferson Lecture, the U.S. federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities. She was honored with the 1996 National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished On May 29, 2012, President Barack Obama presented Morrison with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2016 she received the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction.

Toni Morrison's novels aim to critique the myth of black inferiority and subordination which prevails in largely white culture. Her novels investigate the devastating effects of the beauty standards of the dominant culture on the self image of the African – female adolescent. Toni Morrison's novels are, quest tales in which key characters search for the hidden sign, capable of giving them strength and identity. Toni Morrison's shows the exploitative nature of logo centric orders. Morrison's novels

serve as historical "narratives by showing the links among gender, race, and class.

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Ghansah, Rachel Kaadzi (April 8, 2015). "The Radical Vision of Toni Morrison". The New York Times. Retrieved April 29, 2017. Her father grew up in Georgia. When he was about 15, white people lynched two black businessmen who lived on his street. Morrison said: "He never told us that he'd seen bodies. But he had seen them. And that was too traumatic, I think, for him."

Streitfeld, David; Streitfeld, David (October 8, 1993). Retrieved April 29, 2017. When Morrison was about two, her family's landlord set fire to the house they lived in, while they were home, because her parents couldn't pay the rent. Her family responded to what she called this "bizarre form of evil" by laughing at the landlord rather than falling into despair. Morrison later said her family's response demonstrated how to keep your integrity and claim your own life in the face of acts of such "monumental crudeness."

Brockes, Emma (April 13, 2012). She became a Catholic at the age of 12 and took the baptismal name Anthony (after Saint Anthony), which led to her nickname, Toni.⁸

Cummings, Pip (August 7, 2015). In 1949 she enrolled at the historically black Howard University, saying she wanted to be around black intellectuals.⁹

Hoby, Hermione (April 25, 2015). She was pregnant with their second son when she and Harold divorced in 1964.

Objectives of the Study

1. To be familiar with the need of the concept of human rights.
2. To observe the implementation of human rights in the practical world.
3. To have an idea of the concept of human rights and their violation in fiction.
4. To go through the novels of Toni Morrison in order to explore in them the element of human rights.
5. To interpret the issues of human rights in the context of the various novels of Toni Morrison.
6. To highlight the violation of human rights of the black women characters in particular in the novels- The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved etc.

Hypothesis

1. Human rights are the rights that every individual on earth deserves because of being a human in order to enjoy a respectable life on earth.
2. Most of the people are deprived of the human rights.
3. The English fiction is full of the instances of the violation of human rights violation.
4. Toni Morrison, the famous American novelist, raises the issue of human rights in most of her novels.
5. Her novels like The Bluest Eye, Beloved and Sula are particularly notable for the issues of human rights.
6. Most of her characters are deprived of human rights.

Alienation as the Central Theme Issues of Human Rights

Alienation proves devastating for black women in white America. Away from their native land and chained by the chains of slavery, black women were reduced to the roles of breeder, domestic maid and several other such menial roles. Thus they have endured the most vicious form of racism and sexism which results in their uniquely agonizing alienation.¹⁸ One of the factors which perpetuates this alienation happens to be racial, the Blacks when they entered the white world of supremacy and racial superiority had to wage one of the bitter battles, that has gone down in history as a struggle for achieving equality as equal citizens in a white country. As victims of racial discrimination and slavery for the American Black, the march from slavery to freedom has been a transforming experience. Alienation stemmed from belonging to another race, a race which was brought to America to bear the white man's burden. Much, as Morrison is concerned about the Black man's oppression, she is equally concerned with the Black woman's struggle for freedom, from racial oppression and the oppression of the black man. The sense of alienation rises as the very cause of race discrimination; this is best illustrated in the novel Beloved.

The Bluest Eye narrates the tragic story of a little Black girl Pecola, who wants to somehow escape from the 'blackness' within her and that surrounds her, she yearns to perceive the world with a pair of blue eyes. This novel is a combination of aspects of racism colour and class.

In The Bluest Eye, Pecola is kept away from her parents, classmates and the large society. By telling the stories of a young girl's exposure to sexual harassment and how this affects them, and by showing how marginalized people in The Bluest Eye like the poor Breedlove's, along with the prostitutes, are made vulnerable by the norms of society, Morrison's writing explains human behaviour as something which is the result of oppression and marked by social and cultural constructs. In The Bluest Eye, there is also a special friendship among little girls, where Frieda and Claudia try to rescue Pecola. The fate of Pecola, however, is so devastating that a mutual and lasting friendship between her and the two sisters is beyond reach.

In her second novel Sula, Toni Morrison depicts the quest of the protagonist Sula creating her own self and coming to terms with her identity as a Black and also a woman. The novel demonstrates the difficulties that the Black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their lives. Sula is alienated. She believes that she can create an identity for herself and she lives out of her community and social expectations. Sula explores the destructive limits imposed on the black women, the "bottom" becomes the metaphor for the bottomless abyss into which Sula eventually sinks into, in her quest for selfhood. The interpersonal relationships among the characters in the novel Sula suggest that African Americans still face many difficulties when trying to assimilate into the American mainstream society.

It is however claimed that though Toni Morrison created Sula as a tragic character who fails to negotiate her own identity, her character carries weight as Sula emerges as a role, model for women at large, implementing among women a notion of kinship and unity particularly among Black women as a means of recreating a lost community, more of a 'womanist' than a 'feminist' in her relationship with Nel. What makes Sula deny Nel is her loss of identity.

Other examples of how codes of behaviour are used to reveal differences in class and power in Morrison's fiction are, the social conduct in Sula, which serves to separate Sula from the common blacks in the Bottom, as well as Geraldine's assertion of superiority in her meeting with Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Like Sula, Sethe is an outcast, an outlaw, like her, Sethe does not care for the society but seeks to assert a sense of self.

Tar Baby novel again focuses on the themes of racial identity, sexuality class and family dynamics. The sexual assault unleashed on the black woman. In her another novel *Paradise* is located in all Black town again called Ruby in Oklahoma and the violent attack made on a small female community, by a group of men. The book rightly tackles the issue of the "idea of where Paradise is, and who belongs to it".

With her novel *Love, Beloved* is also about love-the unbounded love of a mother for her children. Toni Morrison creates in the character of Sethe, a mother who is strong and resourceful and who loves her children that she is willing to risk anything including the wrath of god to save them from slavery. It is the masterpiece produced by Toni Morrison. She narrates a real story of the runaway slave Margaret Garner in 1856, who killed her daughter, tried to kill her other children and herself at last rather than coming back to slavery. The novel describes the story of Sethe, who killed her young daughter, *Beloved*, when faced with a similar threat of enslavement. The characters in *Beloved* share alienation and exile either psychologically or physically under the oppressive world dominated by the white standards. Sethe and Paul D represent the twisted absurd people who live in absurdity and rebel against the absurdity through their action escaping from slavery both physiologically and psychologically therefore achieve the freedom eventually.

Pauline and Pecola of *The Bluest Eye*, Nel and Sula in *Sula*, Sethe and Paul D. in *Beloved* are all victims of the sexist and racist oppression of an Anglo – Saxon Standard. The men are not the only oppressors- Black or white but the entire social and cultural norms have perpetrated the racist and racist atrocities on them, from the media to the elementary school primers Carolyn Denard very aptly sums up the situation: It is not however, the physical standards of beauty that these later women feel most oppressed by and subsequently reject but the subservient roles that black women have generally filled in society. They believe that community and societal roles traditionally expected of black women are too limiting. Too much of their time has historically been given over to the domestic work of making life comfortable

for others resulting in few chances for them to think about or to real life their own self fulfillment.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison has boldly raised the issue of issues of human rights and their violation through her characters in all her novels. She seems to be generalizing that the Africans in America are unable to enjoy the rights guaranteed to them for being humans. All her characters, particularly the women characters suffer a lot at the hands of the man in America who finds himself to be at liberty to exploit the black more and more. The women are the prime target of the exploitation. As in real practical life, in the novels too, the south Africans are shown facing brutality, exploitation, class antagonism etc.

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