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Predicament of Women in Toni Morrison's Novels

P.Deepa
Asst Professor, Dept of English,
Pachiyappa's college for women,
Kancheepuram.
81ppdeepa@gmail.com

Abstract

Toni Morrison ranks among the most highly-regarded and widely-read fiction writers and cultural critics in the history of American literature. Novelist, editor, playwright, essayist, librettist, and children's book author, she has won innumerable prizes and awards and enjoys extraordinarily high regard both in the United States and internationally. Her work has been translated into many languages, including German, Spanish, French, Italian, Norwegian, Finnish, Japanese, and Chinese and is the subject of courses taught and books and articles written by scholars all over the world. This article is an attempt to find out that Morrison was the supporter of Womanism and she describes the different types of predicament that women faces in life are reflected in her novels. Longing for treatment as 'fellow human being' is very much pronounced in the African American community. This is further aggrevated by women's impossibility to be away from the association of men. Morrison concept and idea in novel with exclusivity for women to share their joys, sorrows and other feelings among themselves. We see the different kinds of women character in Morrison novels and their dreams also differed in many ways inspite of that most women have optimistic view.

African American women authors and artists present an important part of American culture and literature. Their work and contribution to culture in general was being rejected and overviewed for a long time on account of the former's slavery and racial segregation; they were regarded as inferior and so were their thoughts and works. Violence against African American females, young and old, is an overwhelming concern in the novels of *Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor.* The present study explores the predicament of black females; it also goes into the ways in which black women face their oppression. Tracing the roots of this violence to the days of slavery that justified the inhuman treatment of blacks by their white masters, black women are seen to be the worst sufferers as they have been doubly oppressed because of their race and gender. They also have to bear the brunt of

their men's emasculation by whites. Black female children face abuse in their own homes as well as from their own community.

"Violence and Black Females" naturally embodies two aspects, of race and gender. Violence is without doubt most central to African American experience. The history of blacks in America has invariably been one of victimization and oppression with the interracial violence manifested in whipping, lynching, branding and various other tortures, pogroms, race, riots, and the brutality of white people. White racism appears in the lives of blacks as *"the stepchild of slavery, of colonialism, and as a sentiment which emanated from European nationalism and capitalism"*(**Bonnett and Watson 4).** Slavery, a culture held together by violence, had worked havoc with the black sensibility, not only alienating them from their native African culture but also rendering them chattel status. African American women writers have long struggled for an acknowledged presence in an American literary history dominated by white males. Their literary creations, are efforts at making a mark and having a voice in a culture that by design deprived black women of authority.

Toni Morrison is among the pioneer of those contemporary black writers who have redefined African-American writing in more ways than one. Black women in America being black, have been victimized by racism, sexism, and classism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men. These women have been facing the problems of race, class and gender, which have pushed them towards a margin. Racism, Sexism and Classism signify the traumatic conditions under which African-American live in white America. These are systems of social and psychological oppression that have adversely affected the lives of blacks in general and African-American women in particular. The Black community had to face atrocities like racism and exploitation, irrespective of sex. However, black women were, more oppressed physically and mentally and their cause of grievances was greater. The black men developed a kind of aversion towards the women of their community, regarding them as loose characters which would prefer extramarital adventures to marital permanence. The black women, therefore, had no protection from the men of their own community. It is, however, important to note that race, class and gender have been interrelated in the history of black women. They, in fact, originated from the same set of circumstances and are motivated by economic, social and psychological forces.

Morrison's examination of lives of different characters in black community presents the black experience in a Midwest town-microcosm for the experience of blacks in America. ***The Bluest Eye*** makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between white standards of female beauty and the mental and the psychological oppression of black women. Internal racism which batters the self-image of the African-American female, takes its toll on

the most vulnerable victim. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison examines beauty and value from the perspective of the black community and how black society imposes an incongruous white standard on its constituents. Pecola Breedlove is a young African American girl coming of age during the 1940s. She longs to be loved and accepted by her own community as well as in a world. Pecola's yearning manifests itself in her tragic aspiration to have blue eyes. The narrative is told from a third person omniscient perspective by a neighbor, Claudia MacTeer, who relates the heartbreaking story of Pecola's upbringing as well as the community's responsibility for her ultimate demise. When Geraldine arrives home to see Pecola in her house, she *"saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head…the cheap soles, the soiled socks…the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up…She had seen this girl all of her life…they were everywhere…Get out, you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house"* (T, B E, 92).

The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when her own father rapes her. His tenderness and protectiveness as a father however turns in to lust and rage. Cholly rapes her twice, turning her 'outdoors', pushing her towards the depths of despair and the fringes of insanity. Ultimately Pecola is made the scapegoat for the entire community. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering.

At times enslaved but always oppressed, these adult women characters are abused frequently by multiple sources: spouses, parents, employers, slave owners, and community members. Consequently, the women's mistreatment is then redirected toward others—often children—within the family. While painful to absorb, this redirection can also be seen as an additional mothering lesson—an instinctive message teaching black children coping mechanisms within a world that denies and exploits their self-worth.

The black women stays intact and escape from predicament through song, healing, conjuring and storytelling. Black folk songs draw on history and give voice to decades of struggles and suffering. All black women in The Bluest Eye experience dependency, repression, internal racism and alienation. All these women try to find meaning and fulfillment in different ways. All these women on account of their race and gender are marginal groups "moving at the helm of life". Claudia observes towards the end of the novel." *it's much, much, much too late."* (T, B E,164).

Sula further investigates the repressive white society"s influence on the black community and examines the corruptive forces which compel the members of the black society to reject and alienate one of their own people. The life of Sula Peace, while growing up in the black community of Medallion in the 1920s, is shaped by her experiences with family and friends. A strong sense of feminine identity is displayed in this independent young woman and when she returns to Medallion as an adult, she is feared and treated as an outcast

because of her refusal to conform to the anticipated norms found in black society. Sula‟s best friend from childhood, Nel Wright, assumes the traditional role of wife and mother as an adult and yet, risks losing her own identity in the process. After Sula hears her mother, Hannah, explain that, while she had maternal feelings for Sula, she did not like her, Sula feels *"bewilderment . . . [and] a sting in her eye"* (T, S A, 57).

But Sula's maternal abandonment is real and affects her self-image. Escaping the pain of emotional maternal abandonment, Sula mimics that distance to others for the rest of the novel. In fact, when Sula returns to the town as an adult, she quickly puts her grandmother Eva into a nursing home, instead of caring for her herself, and is massively condemned for it by the townspeople. And yet, her decision makes sense to her because she recognizes no personal connection to her grandmother (or to her dead mother)—and they are the ones who taught her how to feel that way. She rebels against standard expectations for daughters (and women at large), ignoring the dictates of society and behaving with passive violence to those who taught her those emotions.

Sula denies Nel's assertion that black women can't afford to be alone and independent. She declares that every woman she knows is slowly dying. While they are dying like "stumps", sula is "going down like one of those redwoods". She declares that her loneliness is her own whereas Nel's is a "secondhand" loneliness. Nel is also offended by Sula's arrogant talk about how she doesn't need any man, never would have worked for anyone else, and doesn't need anyone now. She asks Sula why she had an affair with Jude, and Sula says it was just because Jude filled up a space in her life; Nel is hurt that she, as Sula's friend, didn't count to fill up any space. She can't get a straight answer from Sula about what their friendship meant to Sula, and realizes that ,*"She can't give a sensible answer because she didn't know."* The last thing Sula asks her is, *"About who was good. How did you know it was you?"* calling into question her identity as a "good" girl and a "good" woman. Nel leaves Sula to die alone, and the people of Medallion feel a sense of relief. Sula's last thoughts are, "Wait'll I tell Nel." She realizes that she has died and thinks that she can't wait to tell Nel that death is painless. showing that their friendship has endured past these difficulties, past death. Years after Sula's death, Nel comes to this realization at her friend's grave: Nel is finally able to identify the source of the grief that has undermined her after her husband's departure; the loss she suffered was actually not him but Sula. The real reason for her sadness, then, is Sula's absence:

> *"'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat.*
> *'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something.*
> *'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.*

> *It was a fine cry —loud and long— but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow".* (T, S A, 174)

Paradise, perhaps slightly less palpable, makes a dream-like reappearance. The basic dynamics of the novel are grounded on the building tension between two adjacent universes: Ruby – a wholly black town in Oklahoma founded on rigid religious principles as a sort of refuge against the injustices which had previously been imposed (for generations) upon the eight founding families, and a nearby convent, which used to be run by nurses, but now provides asylum for a small community of ostentatiously independent "stray" women. Women who all have the predicament situation accidentally gathered in that place. When the unity of the town starts crumbling as a result of the emancipationist spirit of the 1960s and 70s, the bewildered founders of the town choose to save the communal coherence and unity by singling out and attacking a common enemy, the convent women, one of whom is definitely killed and another four presumed dead.

The four missing women make a phantom appearance at the end of the book, when they arguably come to reconcile with their nearest and dearest. Their bodies have not been found, but other parts of the book suggest they were shot at and fatally wounded. One of the convent women – a mother who had previously compulsively run away from her family, after accidentally letting her twin babies die of suffocation in a car. This is the end-scene of her reunion with her daughter, who had previously been unforgiving and spiteful about the accident, but seems to have grown up to understand the predicament of her mother and come to terms with it:

> *Sally watched her mother disappear into the crowd. She ran her finger under her nose, then held the cheek that had been kissed. Did she give her the address? Where was she going? Did they pay? When did they pay the cashier? Sally touched her eyelids. One minute they were sopping biscuits; the next they were kissing in the street.* (T, P,315).

All the characters in Morrison's novels exist in communities that are defined by the racial barriers formed by the surrounding white society. These barriers are both topological and psychological. The dominant white society violates, denies and sets the rules for these borders causing black communities to suffer from confusion and anxiety. On the one hand, Morrison's characters have physical and psychological qualities which enhance their chances for survival and fulfillment, thus leading to the survival of the black community. On the

other, just "being black" in her novels does not promote unity within the community as there also exists racialization and class differences within the black collective.

In **Jazz**, main action of the novel takes place in the African American community of New York City in 1926, twenty years after Joe and Violet Trace have moved north from rural Virginia. For a long time they were happy together in their new life, but eventually their relationship staled. Violet Trace, at fifty, is an attractive hairdresser in a state of emotional crisis after the death of her husband's teenaged lover. She has discovered Joe's infidelity and responds first by releasing her beloved pet birds and then by taking a knife to the face of the dead girl. For the past twenty years, since before her move to New York, Violet was a hardworking, determined woman who had recovered admirably from the early loss of her parents and had forged a strong, sustaining love with her husband.

She and Joe had not been able to have children but didn't much miss them. During one episode, Violet nearly kidnaps a baby she has been asked to watch, thus acting out some deep, unanswered need within her. Violet experiences strange "cracks" in her consciousness when she does and says surprising things. Like Violet, Joe is the survivor of a difficult childhood: raised by the kindly Williams family, he was an orphan whose mother was probably the deranged, rarely seen woman known in the community as "Wild." Meanwhile, Joe falls in love with eighteen-year-old Dorcas Manfred. The narrator explains that Joe loves Dorcas with *"one of those deep down, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going."*

Morrison portrays Dorcas as a troubled, somewhat mysterious girl eager for thrills and risk and perhaps also drawn to death, which took her parents from her so tragically. When Dorcas spurns Joe in favor of a younger lover, he follows her to a party and shoots her; since no one has seen him commit the crime, however, he is not suspected when Dorcas later dies. At Dorcas's funeral, Violet creates a scene by slashing the dead girl's face with a knife. During the next few months, both Joe and Violet are tormented by thoughts of Dorcas, and Violet begins visiting the girl's aunt, Alice Manfred, in order to understand what has happened. Violet's anger and despair over Joe's affair with her lover, Dorcas, push Violet closer to madness, but her visits to the girl's aunt help her gain equilibrium as she learns more about Dorcas and shares observations on love and life with Alice. Finally Violet achieves a kind of self-acceptance, asserting that *"now I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see.... The one she would have liked."* Violet's mother, Rose Dear, who committed suicide in despair over her poverty and her absent husband. Morrison works are populated predominantly by troubled characters who seek identity and meaning in an oppressive society. In her usual elegant, fluid prose and with careful attention to detail,

Morrison shows how African Americans responded to, and in many cases overcame, both harsh political realities and personal hardships.

Love traces the lives of its fictional characters through several major periods of American history. The legacies of segregation and integration are an especially important part of the novel. The story, when one puts its fragments together, centers around Morrison's great theme, the intimate relationships that women have and how they can be damaged by the random cruelties of fate and time. Its two protagonists are Christine Cosey and Heed Johnson Cosey, the granddaughter and wife of Bill Cosey, the charismatic owner of an ocean-front resort that serves the black elite of the south. But the three most powerful characters of the story are Christine and Heed, whose lives are so guided by their hate for each other that they can't see how that hatred seeped into everything in their lives, and Bill Cosey. The central relationship of the novel is that between Heed and Christine. Morrison demonstrates the ways in which the innocent bond between the two girls is destroyed by social forces in the guise of love. Cosey's Resort becomes a symbol of black history, highlighting tensions within American society but also within the black community itself. The main plot, the ongoing battle between the surviving old women, Heed and Christine, is pitched. Their unmerciful and unrelenting fight is a personal and individual affair of love and hate, yet it is deeply tainted by history, which both of them do not recognize and cannot understand. Even Christine's former involvement with the civil-rights-movement has no lasting political consequences, her outlook on life strictly remains to be personal.

The relationship between Heed and Christine, however, once had been pure love, tender, and overwhelming in its innocence. Yet, growing up, being subjected to the desires of the flesh, contesting for the attention of a lecherous old man, being corrupted by the splendors of wealth, and lured by impulse of power, their love turned into hate, as all consuming as their love once had been. It is only at the end of the novel, in the face of death, that they begin to understand what had happened to them. The relationship between Christine and Heed finally is healed when Christine follows Heed and Junior to the old hotel, where they seek an old menu on which to forge a will that will clarify Heed as Bill's intended beneficiary. After Heed falls through a floorboard and Junior flees the hotel, Christine and Heed are forced to confront one another. They find that the words that come out are those of long-lost friends, not the enemies they have become. They discuss the events that tore them apart and come to the wistful conclusion that "*We could have been living our lives hand in hand."* The next day Romen, Junior's lover, finds Christine embracing her friend's body. And therefore, aptly, the long dead 'L' visiting the cemetery, unravels the secret when she thinks about the quality of human relations, starting with the dependency of children on their well intentioned parents:

> *Parents can be lax or strict, timid or confident, it doesn't matter. Whether they are handing out goodies and, scared by tears, say yes to any whim, or wether they spend their days making sure the child is correct and corrected – whatever kind they are, their place is secondary to a child's first chosen love. If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one.* (T, L, 231).

In *Love* , the novel reaps the benefits of Morrison once again searching for the sense of the human and universal that made her great to begin with. The novel's greatest strengths lie in Morrison's character development and how she sets up the numerous elements of the story. In 1993 Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. On awarding the prize the Nobel committee described her work as "characterized by visionary force and poetic import [that] gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (Nobel website). Morrison's essays and articles make powerful use of narrative and imagery. One never forgets that she is a novelist writing analytic prose or a social and cultural critic writing fiction.