



E-ISSN: 2706-8927
P-ISSN: 2706-8919
www.allstudyjournal.com
IJAAS 2020; 2(3): 329-331
Received: 16-05-2020
Accepted: 26-06-2020

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The creative corpus of Toni Morrison: A cursory glance

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Abstract

Regarded as the vanguard of Afro-American literature, Toni Morrison occupies an unassailable place in the world of letters with her novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Paradise* (1998) and many others. She is an Afro-American by birth but a pure African by her race. Her novels clearly depict the environmental degradation along with the suffering of Africans in America. While going through her novels, readers could easily make out that how she has deliberately intermingled the issues of race, gender and environment in them. The very fact that she had received Nobel Prize for Literature corroborates to the view that her writings are universal and global in their approach rather than being regional or race bound. The present paper thus is an attempt to offer a bird's eye view of her fictional output in front of readers with an aim to generate interest and curiosity in their minds.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Novels, African, Black Writing, Race, Gender, Fiction

Introduction

Toni Morrison was the first successful female Afro-American author who through her creative corpus carved her own niche in the otherwise male-dominated world. The world of Afro-American literature produced great male writers like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and James Baldwin. She made her official entry into the territory of creative writing with her novel *The Bluest Eye* which appeared in 1970 when she was in her 30s. *The Bluest Eye* is about a black girl who wants to have blue eyes. The story is told from the perspective of two adolescent sisters, Claudia and Frieda Mac Teer and digs out the horrible effects of racism and the consequent framing of white standards of beauty which demolishes the self-identity of a little black girl, Pecola Breedlove. The protagonist of the novel has internalised this fact that only people with blue eyes and white skin are loved by others, and people like her i.e. blacks are not meant to be loved. She thus secretly harbours a desire to have blue eyes which ultimately descended her into madness as the novelist traces her life across four seasons. Pecola reels under serious identity crisis which was further worsened by her father who rapes her and makes her pregnant. Community at large doesn't support her. Rather, they torture her by segregating her which lands her in the island of madness. *The Bluest Eye* merges as a forceful voice on the literary scene which portrayed, slammed and challenged the Western parameters of beauty which had instilled the seeds of inferiority in blacks. Though the novel got mixed reactions, it burrowed into the issues of self-identity and self-esteem and weaved them with the racial and gender discrimination of the times to create an impact upon the readers.

In 1973, Morrison came up with her second novel *Sula* which was about the friendship of two black girls. This novel gained more popularity than *The Bluest Eye* and was also nominated for National Book Award in 1975. The story of *Sula* is set in a small town of Ohio and traces the events between 1919 and 1965. The story revolves around two black girls, Nel and Sula. Both these girls meet at the age of twelve and share a dream to explore the whole world. Sula leaves the town and goes on to explore the world around her. On the other hand, Nel marries Jude and turns house wife. But, the break in friendship comes when Sula returned to the town after ten years. She is so much attracted to Nel's husband that she starts an affair with Jude. The story ends with the death of Sula and realization on the part of Nel that it is her friendship with Sula which transcends everything for her in this brutal world full of complexities. After the publication of *Sula*, Morrison faced a lot of personal problems like economic constraints, adolescence period of her son and death of her father.

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The death of her father gave a serious jolt to her and she kept on thinking about her father. As she started working on her third novel, she used to have long imaginative conversations with her father as she needed his inputs in the novel which talked about the attitude and perceptions of men. And, finally she came up with one of the most astonishing creations from her pen, *The Song of Solomon*. She even won National Book Critics Circle Award for this masterpiece. The story of the novel traces the four generations of blacks, starting with Macon Dead Jr. who is also referred to as Milkman in the novel. Milkman travels to South in search of a family's hidden treasures of gold. But in the process he traces his roots and searches his true identity. Through his hunt to the South, Morrison traces the history of black immigration from male perspective.

Tar Baby is another feather in the cap of Morrison. With this novel which got published in the year 1981, Morrison achieved an even higher stature in the literary arena. The story weaves a romantic tale to communicate Morrison's idea of racial exploitation. The protagonist of the novel is Jadine who is a jet set fashion model and falls in love with a boy, Son. But their relationship doesn't materialize. He doesn't feel discouraged and goes after her with a hope that she will soon reconcile with her. Morrison restricts herself to depict only the relationship between black man and black woman to show how reconciliation between both of them is vital for the growth of black community. According to Morrison, this kind of reconciliation can only happen if both of them try to comprehend that identities of both of them are shaped by racial exploitation as both are the victims of this horror of slavery. Son, here emerges as a revolutionary hero who realizes the importance of knowing one's relationship with other people and commits himself to share his experience with other blacks as this is the only way to heal the wounds of racial exploitation.

After *Tar Baby*, the literary world feasted on Morrison's most celebrated novel *Beloved* which changed the whole face of Afro-American literature when it got published in the year 1987. The book got wide critical acclaim and remained the best seller continuously for twenty-five weeks. She even won Pulitzer Prize for this novel in 1988. In 1970s, while collecting material for her ambitious work *The Black Book*, Morrison came across an article which tells the real event of 1851 in which a slave named Margret Garner killed her own children so that her children might not face the horrors and exploitation of slavery. This incident left a huge impact on Morrison's mind and she used it as the foundation of her epic saga on slavery. Apart from that, *Beloved* was also the first part of Morrison's dreams trilogy on slavery followed by *Jazz* and *Paradise*. The plot of the novel centres round Se the who kills her own daughter to prevent her from enslavement. After many years the ghost of her daughter Beloved appears and it starts dominating Se the and her house. When the horror of ghost reaches to the level of destruction, Se the's second daughter calls the community to throw the ghost out of the house. The ghost here in the novel is symbolic of black's past memories of the horrors of slavery. The novel gained so much popularity that it was adapted as a movie which was directed by Jonathan Demme where the role of the protagonist was performed by Oprah Winfrey.

Jazz (1992) is the sixth novel which came from the creative pen of Toni Morrison. The story of *Jazz* is set in the Harlem of 1930s. The plot revolves around a childless African

couple, Joe and Violet Trace who have come to city in the North from countryside of South with many hopes and aspiration. But, the monotony and loneliness of city life mocks at all their hopes and frustrates them. The novel offers a disturbing psychological study of the characters who get entangled in the city life and desperately try to adjust with their frustration and isolation. Joe and Violet's life has become fragmented and directionless which further push them to do things which are dangerous and absurd. Under this directionless mindset, Joe initiates an affair with Dorcas and ultimately murders her. Violet too turns dangerous as she attacked the corpse of Dorcas at her funeral. The novel, however, ends with a note of hope as Felice enters as a symbol of happiness in their life by sharing their joys and sorrows.

Paradise (1998) is an attempt by Morrison to express those aspects of Afro-American history which had been ignored by mainstream literature till then. The novel is basically a compilation of two books which come together in the end. One book narrates the story of a black town named Ruby and shows how its inhabitants are finding it hard to maintain their self-identity. The second book tells the story of five women who meet at a place called Convent and die there. Through the intermingling of these two plots, Morrison shows why males fear that their paradise faces threat from women. The novel was an attempt on her part to fill the missing gaps of Afro-American history. The novel finally ends with the images of fantastical world and gives the message that in order to gain paradise one has to fight for it and once it is gained, it requires further fighting for its protection.

Love (2003) is the first product of her 21st century creative output. It is the story of a dead hotelier Bill Cosey and people around him. After his death, Cosey has left Heed, his widow and Christine, her granddaughter in the family. Both of them are of same age, and hence become friends after his death. But after forty years, these two become enemies and fight over Cosey's will. Despite these differences, the two women share the mansion of Cosey. Though the novel seems to be the story of a family which is involved in personal disputes, Morrison has addressed bigger issues with this personal history. The issue of US history segregation and its movement towards desegregation is the main highlight of the novel which is discussed under the shroud of Cosey's family history.

A Mercy is another significant creation of Morrison which enticed the readers with its publication in the year 2008. It is the tale of a girl named Florens who works in D'Ortega's plantation. Jacob Vaark visits D'Ortega to take payment of his loan. But D'Ortega offered one of his servants, i.e. Florens as a payment to the debt. During this visit, Vaark gets so much impressed by the grandeur of Ortega's mansion that he decides to create one for himself. In frenzy of this house, he involved himself in slave trade. But, before the completion of the house Vaark dies and his wife falls ill. Florens falls in love with Blacksmith who come to fence the house. When Rebekke falls ill, she sends Florens to trace Blacksmith who has got healing powers. Florens too see it as an opportunity to meet his love. But, her hope are not fulfilled as Blacksmith preferred Michael to Florens. Florensturns wild and writes her own story on the walls of Vaark's dream mansion which according to Morrison is the assertion of black identity in the world created by whites.

Home (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015) are latest

additions to the great corpus of fictional writing by Toni Morrison. *Home* is a story of Frank Money who is a veteran of Korean War. The novel traces his journey from the place he is discharged from army and to the place which is his homeland. In the novel, after witnessing the death of his two friends, Frank suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to which he roams on the streets idly and doesn't clean himself. He is sent to hospital. But, he escapes from hospital to help his sister who is suffering from illness. And, then he goes back to Lotus Georgia. Later in the novel, Frank saves the life of Lee and realizes that though they earlier hated their real home town, but Lotus Georgia is indeed their real home.

God Help the Child spins a story around the problems and sufferings of children and unravels how they can mould and break the life of adults around them. It narrates the story of a blue-black skin girl named Lula Ann Bridwell who is ignored, hated and abused by her light skinned parents Bride is punished by her mother Sweetness for being dark. Her father had left her mother as he could not bear the sight of a dark child and blamed Sweetness for it. Sweetness acts in this way as she wants to protect her child from the outside world, which is bound to punish Bride much more because of her blackness. Sweetness's choice becomes debatable but brings out the essence of the novel which shows how a mother's choice is moulded by the situation of blacks in a world dominated by whites.

Apart from that, Morrison tried her hands at children literature along with Slade Morrison. Her major works in this genre are *The Big Box* (1999), *Penny Butter Fudge* (2009), *Please, Louise* (2014). Theatre too gets taste of Morrison's art through her plays like *Dreaming Emmet* which was performed in 1986 and *Desdemona* which was first enacted in the year 2011. Even her non-fictional creations garnered the eyeballs of readers and critics all over the world. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* was one of her significant writings which left a mark in the non-fictional world in 1992. Other significant non-fictional works are *Racing Justice*, *Engendering power*, *Birth of a Nationhood*, *Burn This Book*, etc.

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