



E-ISSN: 2706-8927
P-ISSN: 2706-8919
www.allstudyjournal.com
IJAAS 2020; 2(2): 269-271
Received: 13-02-2020
Accepted: 20-03-2020

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Shaping influences on Toni Morrison: A case study

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Abstract

Every author is influenced by its surroundings and every author shapes the surroundings in which he or she writes. Toni Morrison is no exception to this. There are many shaping influences which have shaped her into a fabulous author which we have today. The present study delves deep into those shaping influences which helped her in embarking and making an indelible mark in her journey to be one of the greatest writers of modern epoch.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, education, black writers, afro-american, autobiographical, editor.

Introduction

Toni Morrison is unanimously regarded by readers, critics and scholars as the torchbearer and vanguard of Afro-American literature. Indubitably, such paeans of praise and eulogistic words are no exaggeration for a monumental figure like Toni Morrison who is the eighth woman and the first black woman to win the most coveted the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1993 for her unprecedented and outstanding contribution to the world of letters which fetched her two standing ovations ever in the history of Nobel Prize Ceremony during her speech.

The great chronicler of Afro-American experiences came to this world on 18th February, 1931 when America was going through the phase of Great Depression. The real name of Toni Morrison was Chloe Anthony Wofford. She was the second of four issues of Ramah and George Wofford. Her father, George Wofford was a hard working man who did three jobs simultaneously, primary among them being the work of a shipyard welder. Her father was a hardcore or we can say staunch racist as he believed that there could never be harmony between blacks and whites because whites were a snobbish group of people who could never overcome their racial bigotry. He even resorted to violent practices in order to give an outlet to his anger towards whites. All this had a deep impact on the psyche of Morrison. Toni was not at all happy with his racist attitude.

On the other hand, her mother carried a totally different outlook towards racism. Her mother, Ramah Wofford came from Alabama and was a homemaker. She was a religious lady and believed a lot in the power of education. Ramah's parents were cheated by whites out of their lands. So, they moved to north Ohio. In comparison to her father, Morrison's mother is strong and didn't carry pugnacious attitude towards whites. She accepted that racism was a reality and education of blacks was the only solution which could give them freedom from the fetters of racism. Infact, she taught her children how to heal the wounds of racism. Once when they were unable to pay the rent of house, their white landlord set ablaze their house. Toni's parents laughed off the matter in spite of going to a melancholic state. Such a reaction from her parents taught Morrison how to maintain integrity in tough circumstances which is reflected in most of her novels.

Morrison's grandparents too played an important role in her life. Her grandparents worked as share croppers in Alabama. When lynching of blacks increased to an alarming rate, the family decided to move to Lorain, Ohio in order to ensure better survival for their family. Morrison's grandparents and her parents have been victims of racism and slavery in the South. Though they moved to North for better life, their life even in Ohio was full of racial and economic hardships. Though Morrison was not a direct victim of slavery and racism down South, she had heard enough of those barbarities from her parents and grandparents which played an important role in developing her perceptions which then in turn contributed a lot in shaping her as a creative writer.

Infact, storytelling was an important part of Morrison's childhood. Her parents used to narrate their children Afro-American folk tales, ghost stories, myths and songs which

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Incorporated in them a sense of Afro-American history and improved their language part which again helped a lot in shaping Morrison as a writer. Even as a child, Toni was an avid reader of European and Russian masterpieces. She loved to read great writers like Leo Tolstoy, Jane Austen and Dostoevsky. Their influence on her critical output is clearly perceptible in her works. Apart from literature, music too flowed in the family which contributed to the musical quality of her prose. Ramah's father was a violinist; Ramah herself played piano and could sing anything like opera, blues, pop and jazz. Infact, there was a song 'Green the only son of solomon' which had been used by Morrison as the turning point in many of her novels was basically a song which her mother's family used to sing. The influence of the family in developing her sense of history, music, language, culture is thus undoubtedly there which moulded her identity as well as her abilities as an author.

Her experiences in Lorain were also significant as these experiences helped her in understanding the overlapping phenomenon of racism. As a child, when she was a first grade student, she was the only black child in the class. She was not made to feel inferior by white children, as for children such racial boundaries never existed. They were away from political inclinations. Many white girls were friends of Toni. But, later on as they become adults, the lines separating blacks and whites became quite obvious. Moreover in Lorain, there was no separate black neighbourhood. They lived happily with Greek family on the one side and Italian family on the other side of their house. Thus in the background of racial hatred, Morrison had seen the assimilation of different cultures, viz. blacks and whites in a peaceful and cordial way. Despite all this, Lorain was not some imaginative American melting pot which was bereft of racism. In Lorain, she became witness to both these aspects of racism which bred hatred and love at the same time. But, it made her somehow hopeful that all whites were not perpetrators of violence and racial discrimination which emerged as one of the major arguments in most of her creative writings.

As far as her education is concerned, she attended Lorain High School and was an all-rounder. She excelled not only in studies but also left her mark as an active participant in debate team and the drama club of the school. During her schooling, she also took a part time job of cleaning people's houses. In spite of all this, Toni Morrison enrolled herself in Howard University in 1949 and it was here she got her nick name Toni which she got from her middle name Anthony. She got this middle name at the age of 12 when she became a Catholic. But, it was a place where she got to learn the real meaning of racism as she saw segregated restaurants, schools, clubhouses and buses through her own eyes and got her graduation degree of B.A. in English in the year 1953. It was followed by M.A. in English from Cornell University in the year 1955. Her Master's thesis was based on the theme of suicide and alienation in the novels of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner whose works too delineated the life of South America.

Her stay in Howard was very crucial for engendering and developing her black literary consciousness. At Howard, Toni joined the theatrical company of the university, i.e. the Howard Players. As a part of the company, she came to know that black literary conscious was under wraps till 1940s and no great Afro-American writer like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were included in the

curriculum of any university. With her company, Toni went on a tour to South, i.e. to the place where her ancestors belonged. There in the South, Howard Players performed only for black audience. While interacting with blacks there, she came to know about the hellish life of blacks. This tour made her realize the extent of brutal and undiluted racism which her ancestors and parents had to bear.

After completing her education, she joined Texas Southern University as English teacher in Houston where she stayed for two years. Later in 1957, she joined Howard University where she offered her services for seven years. These two universities where she worked as English teacher proved to be a landmark in her literary career. It was here only that she started studying black culture as an academic discipline. Moreover, it was here only that she met various people like AmiriBarka, Andrew Young and Stokely Carmichael who were actively involved in the struggle for Afro-American equality. Howard University was also important for her because she met Harold Morrison here, whom she later married. Harold Morrison was an architect from Jamaica. They got married in 1958 and Toni bore their first child, Harold Ford in 1961. Then in 1964, Toni became pregnant again and she left her job in the university. After that she went for a Europe tour. But as she returned from there, she got herself divorced from Harold Morrison in 1964 due to cultural differences.

After her divorce, she joined Random House in 1965 as an editor for L.W. Singer which was a text book division of the publishing house. From here, she went to New York's office of Random House. As an editor of Random House, she played a key role in reviving black literature and brought it back to the mainstream literature. Her first achievement at Random House was her book *Contemporary African Literature* (1972) which incorporated works by writers like Chinua Achebe, AtholdFugard and Wole Soyinka. She even helped writers in improving their manuscripts and became a foster mother for a host of Afro-American writers like Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones. Not only this, during her twelve year stay at Random House, she edited books by black Americans like Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali and Andrew Young to name only a few. She also penned the autobiography of Muhammad Ali titled *The Greatest*. The most significant work was her edited work *The Black Book* which appeared on the literary scene in 1974. This book included an anthology of essays, articles, photographs and studies of black life from the time of slavery to the times this book got published.

Thus through her work at Random House, she was successful in bringing a lot of black female authors on the centre stage. In fact, she had great regard for the significant work by female authors. In her interview with Times magazine, she accepts this fact that her achievements might propel women round the world to come up with their works and voice their creativity which has been silenced since millennia.

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