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African-American Feminist Consciousness in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract:

African- American Feminist consciousness is an awakening that one is oppressed not because one is ignorant, not because one is lazy, not because one is stupid but just because one is African- American and female. African American feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. It is an apprehension that one is a victim because one is African- American, female and poor.

Black women are differentiated not only in terms of male standard and poverty but also most importantly by Euro- American women's standard.

Morrison projects black feminist consciousness through her novels. The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved and Jazz. African American women have a unique place in American life and literature.

Keywords: Consciousness, Feminist, Oppressed, Victimization, Apprehension, Poverty.

Being an African American woman Toni Morrison has projected African- American feminist consciousness in her writings. African American feminist consciousness is an awakening that one is oppressed not because one is ignorant, not because one is lazy, not because one is stupid but just because one is African American and female. African American feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization It is an apprehension that one is a victim because one is consciousness female and poor.

African-American women have a unique place in American life and literature. Morrison knows this and therefore she says: "There is something inside (them) that makes (them) different from other people. It is not like men and it is not like white women" (Parker: 255). Because of their difference from the other categories of African society.

In the case of white women, they have some support to fall back upon. Morrison knows the predicament of black women and therefore she says: “She has nothing to fall back on not maleness, not whiteness, not lady hood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (63).

Black women are differentiated not only in terms of male standard and poverty but also most importantly by Euro-African women’s standard. In almost every other instance, the black woman is understood in contrast to the Euro-American white woman. As a result they are discarded and suffer from self-scorn.

Through her novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992), Morrison projects black feminist consciousness.

Morrison very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* indicates a black girl’s quest for white values Pecola, a black girl wants to have blue eyes, the symbol of white beauty. Pecola believes that such eyes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. However, her eyes cannot be changed into blue eyes in reality. As a result her quest for blue eyes culminates in madness. Perhaps these blue eyes are urgently needed by her because she is a girl.

Pecola believes that it is blue eyes alone that will help her in restoring her self-respect. Morrison rightly points out: “When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble.” (89) Therefore, Pecola is a person who is in perpetual trouble.

To indicate this point Morrison depicts two black families- the Mactees and the Breedloves. Morrison depicts the Mactees as having the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow. Pecola’s family, on the other hand, is without those resources.

The novel opens with the three versions of the Dick and Jane reader so prevalent in the public schools at the time (1940) of the novel. Morrison uses the technique to juxtapose the fictions of the white educational process with the realities of life of black children. The ironic quality of the school and home experience is reflected through the structure of the novel.

Pecola is rejected by all her parents, teachers and schoolmates. She assigns her rejection by society to the lack of blue eyes. She is obsessed with blue eyes so much so that she consoles herself by buying and eating her favorite candy, the Mary Jane with, Mary Jane’s picture on the wrapper that has a white face, blonde hair and blue eyes. She eats the

candy because she believes that “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.” (Morrison: 43)

This symbolic cannibalism is a sign of Pecola’s instability and madness “The desire for blue eyes is evidence of Pecola’s frustration with her identity, with her world, and of her longing for herself. The desire for blue eyes is part of the inverted quality of her world; in wanting blue eyes Pecola wants, in fact, to be white” (Weever :406)

However, by no means can she succeed in getting blue eyes and becoming white. On the contrary, she becomes a victim of her wrong values which do not belong to her community. However unlike Pecola, Claudia’s self-consciousness protector her from the deadly destruction. Contrary to Pecola who cuddles the image of blue-eyed and blonde-haired girls that dominated her world Claudia destroys them all and the values they represent. By dismantling the doll, she responds with her anger, turning topsy turvy the negative socializing values the doll represents. The egocentricity of childhood causes Claudia to reject that which is alien and threatening to her. The awareness of her rejection develops an acute anger towards those who reject her. She does so because her parents have instilled in her positive self-consciousness.

Thus by providing two similar black female characters. Morrison reveals how white euro-centric standards of beauty and self play havoc with the lives of these girls. Morrison also shows how a conscious black woman can evade the extreme effects of racism and sexism if she trusts herself. It is the consciousness on the part of Claudia and the unawareness of Pecola that allow the one to survive and pushes the other into madness.

In *Sula*, Morrison depicts the quest of a female protagonist, Sula, for creating her own self and coming to terms with her identity as a black woman. Morrison demonstrates the difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self.

Morrison creates an unusual world in the novel. The place where her characters live has an unusual history to tell. Sula, her mother Hannah, and Grandmother Eva live in a place called Bottom in Medallion city, Ohio. This part of the city was ironically called Bottom though it is up in the hills.

Sula is born in a family where the women reign supreme. Eva, her grandmother, is an archetypal “great mother.” She nourishes and protects her family by providing sustenance and life. Although her role as great mother places Eva in a situation that requires her to sacrifice. She also embodies the dark side of the role, the role of a “terrible mother”. Eva, like Eve, is both the taker of life and giver of life. She is, in other words, capable of destroying

that to which she has given life. She sacrifices herself and she also sacrifices her son when it is necessary.

However, both Eva and Hannah conform to convention by marrying and raising families of course, their traditional behavior ends as and when they get the chance. Hannah never bothers to remarry after being left a widow. She gives Sula an unconventional image of womanhood and motherhood through her “sooty” lifestyle. Hannah simply refuses to live without the support of a man. After her husband Rekus death, she takes a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors (Morrison: 47). For her, “sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of must and a definite commitment.” So, she is known as “daylight lover” (45). Hannah does not need any intimate relationship with anyone; all she needs to feel fulfilled is to be touched. Consequently, her friendship with other women is short lived because she inevitably ends up making love to their husbands or men. Hannah has no concern for the norms or roles prescribed by society. She does not want to be a wife, a lover, or a prostitute. She does not feel the need to be possessed by someone. She simply “loved maleness, for its own sake” (43).

Thus, Eva and Hannah act as role models to Sula. There is a woman-centered universe and the values that rule their house are the ones that are particularly beneficial to women (Washington: 4-5). They live in a world they have created, and though they are married, neither Eva nor Hannah is ever known by the man’s name she is married to.

Morrison brings out the predominant traits of Sula’s personality by providing readers with another character, Nel wright. In fact, sula and Nel are the two faces of the same coin. Morrison herself has talked about the Nel – Sula friendship which authenticates this statement (Naylor and Morrison: 578). Though Sula and Nel wright come from different backgrounds, they find in each other something they like intimately.

Unlike Sula, *Song of Solomon* is a story of Macon Dead III, nicknamed Milkman, who comes to terms with his identity through his aunt, Pilate Dead, a woman who lives without the support of any man. Though *Song of Solomon* is the story of Milkman, it is also this story of Milkman’s father Macon Dead II, mother Ruth Foster Dead sisters Magdalene called Lena and first Corinthian, and aunt Pilate dead, her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar. On the one hand, Milkman is linked with his father and his values, and on the other, with his aunt and her values. Both his father and aunt represent two entirely different value systems. Macon dead II is, in fact, “more white than black” (Willis: 34). He is thoroughly Euro centric, while Pilate is Afrocentric in her approach.

Milkman's father is an ambitious black man who has created a world of his own. He believes and propagates the gospel of "own other things. And let the things you own other things. Then you will own yourself and other people too" (Morrison: 55). Hence he never treats others as living beings but as commodities to be owned by him. His approach towards all others related to him – Ruth, Lena, First Corinthian, and his sister Pilate dead – is a materialistic one. As a result, his "ownership principle" controls the lives of milkman's mother and two sisters. On the contrary, Pilate's household is poor but full of love, affection, mutual care and nurturing. Unlike Sula and Eva in *Sula* and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, we come across Jadine child, a grown up and educated version of Pecola Breed love in *Tar Baby*. In fact, *Tar Baby* is the story of the struggle of a modern black woman to come to terms with her modern materialistic aspirations in her struggle for fulfillment, she ultimately loses her roots from the white as well as the African- American world and becomes a double orphan, a pariah figure (Reyes :19).

At a very early age. She has lost her father and mother, and has been adopted by her uncle Sydney and aunt Ondine child. As Sydney and Ondine work for a white family, the streets and the child. Thus, through Jadine, Morrison depicts the problems of a contemporary black woman.

The very title of the novel *Tar Baby* is based on a folktale. Ironically, Morrison also refers to the importance of tar in the African world. In this background, Jadine is a tar baby who traps son, the black man who stands for Afrocentric values but becomes a victim of the white materialistic values and the world order represented by Jadine. Morrison describes Jadine as a person who loses her identity as a woman, internalizes white values and forces son, criminal- turned-lover and later on her husband, to abandon his identity as a black man. She internalizes white values so much so that like any other white woman, she thinks of rape the moment she see him. She also smells him to place him in the category of animals. However, the very act of smelling reminds her of the canine species.

Unlike the *Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning Novel *Beloved* reflects African – American feminist consciousness effectively.

It deals with the life of a female slave, sethe, who kills her own daughter to prevent her from slavish sufferings. Sethe's is an act of mercy killing, an act performed by a mother out of concern for her daughter and her community.

Though *Beloved* in general is about slavery, it is not a call for the abolition of slavery as it is a story narrated to a twentieth century audience. It is mainly a story of a black female slave who develops awareness about her own subhuman status on the Sweet Home Plantation

which intimately awakens and forces her to develop a quest for freedom. It records the cruelty; violence and degradation which makes a female slave, sethe understand her situation and awaken from a deep slumber.

Sethe, as a slave, has undergone many inhuman insults. Basically, in the beginning she is brought to the beginning she is brought to the sweet Home Plantation—which is neither sweet nor a Home—to replace Baby Suggs, another slave woman, who is old now. Baby Suggs has given birth to eight children. Her freedom is purchased by her own son. Halle Suggs with his five years of working on Sundays. Baby Suggs has served as a breeding slave woman and has attended to Mr. and Mrs. Garners.

Morrison shows that for the plantation owners, black slaves were in no way different from their cattle. She describes how Sethe and Halle mate on top of a mattress kept in a cabin. For the first two times, they also used the cornfield like animals. While mating, they were under the impression that they were hidden. In fact, “Halle wanted privacy for her and got public display” (Morrison: 33). By the time, she is nineteen; Sethe is pregnant for the fourth time. In all, she gives birth to two sons, Howard and Buglar, and two daughters Beloved and Denver.

In due course of time Sethe realizes that the schoolteacher represents the most treacherous kind of institutional evil. Therefore, she plans for the safety of her kids notebook. The schoolteacher maintains a notebook. His notebook symbolizes the dispassionate and cold-blooded scientific racism that has marked the western culture. Once she realizes what the notebook is about, she experiences the true erosion of her very black female self.

Being a female slave herself and also well informed about the atrocities faced by Baby Suggs and her own mother, she thinks time and again about the future of her own kids. She understands that everyone Baby Suggs knew and loved ran off was hanged or was rented out, or loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, gagged, won or seized. As a result, Baby Sugg’s eight children had six fathers. She had no permanent relation with any man in her life. So Sethe decides to run away from the plantation.

Toni Morrison’s recent novel *Jazz* is a story of a faithful wife, violet, who disfigures the face of even the dead eighteen- year- old beloved of her husband, Joe Trace.

Joe Trace, a black man in his fifties, is a Salesman who sells and delivers Cleopatra beauty products. Though he is otherwise a devoted husband, he kills his own beloved, Dorcas when he believes that she has betrayed him. Like *Beloved*, *Jazz* is also based on a sensational incident. Ironically, in *Beloved*, it is a mother who kills her daughter with a handsaw, to

liberate her daughter from slavery in Jazz; it is a black man who kills a black girl, just to indicate his dislike for his beloved's betrayal.

Joe was raised by a woman who told him that his parents had disappeared without a trace. Therefore, when he goes to school, he gives his name Joe Trace, because he thought the trace they disappeared without was Joe himself. Like him, Dorcas, his beloved, was also an orphan. However Joe kills her for his own satisfaction. This indicates the complexity of the life of African – Americans and specially that of African – American women. However, it is violet's reaction to Dorcas which catches our attention. Perhaps this novel reveals how ever a faithful black man can become unfaithful and betray his wife as well as beloved. No doubt Dorcas might be wrong but does it mean that an unfaithful husband has a right to ask for faithfulness? Perhaps it is in this fashion that Morrison reveals the predicament of black women in a white, racist, sexist America.

In short, Toni Morrison's novels the Bluest eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved and Jazz express a strong critique of the male dominance.

Her characters like Sula, Pilate, Lena and Jadine try to create a world of their own.

In short, Morrison has not proclaimed herself to be a black feminist as vehemently as writers such as Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, NtozakeShange, June Jordon, Gayle, Jones, Barbara Smith and Deborah MacDowell. However, in her novels the Bluest eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved and Jazz, she goes much deeper, into the very roots of racism and sexism. In a subtle way, she reveals the ideological basis of these pernicious social evils.

To bring them out effectively, she digs out the legends, myths, folk stories and folk songs of African Americans.

No doubt Morrison being a versatile novelist never uses the same theme and pattern in her novels. She brings out a variety of experiences of black life to create the black world. However in this variety, we also find African- American feminist consciousness.

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