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The Bluest Eye to Love: Thematic and Structural Evolution in the Fiction of Toni Morrison

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A literary giant of the 1990's, Toni Morrison is one of the most significant and relevant writers on the literature scene today. Being a black woman in America, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Needless to say that her brilliance as a literaturist was very much conspicuous since her first novel, *The Bluest eye* got published in 1970. Her distinguished contribution has transformed and opened a new vista for American Literary Landscape.

By any standard of literary evaluation, 'Toni Morrison is a phenomenon, in the classic sense of once-in-a-lifetime rarity, the literary equivalent of Paul Robison, Michael Jordan Wayne Gretzky or Chris Evert, the super star whose touch upon her profession makes us wonder if we shall ever see her like again. (Harris 97)

To her, writing is liberation and artistic mode of self-expression. She analyses the reasons behind misrepresenting the black reality by the privileged group. She forcefully negates the hierarchical order formed by the ideas of the white domination and inquires the ideology that forms the basis of such a categorization. Through her work she probes into the perplexities of African Experience in America. She is concerned with the idea of a black community – what such a community once meant, how it has changed, and how despite those changes, it is and should be maintained. Toni Morrison has evolved the mythology of black culture in her novels. It is mythology that she retrieved out of a sense of urgency because she felt that there was a crisis in the culture.

The mythology has existed in the other forms in black culture in the music, gospels, and spirituals. It existed in what we said, and in our relationship with each other in a kind of village lore. The community had to take on that responsibility of passing from one generation to another the mythologies, the given qualities, stories, assumption which an ethnic group, that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream, keeps very much intact for survival. The consequences of the political thrust to share in the economy and power of the country were to disperse that. Also, the entertainment world and fashion have eaten away at all of those moorings so that the music isn't ours anymore. It used to be an

underground personal thing. It's right that should be larger no.
(Ruas 96).

She strives that the history of slavery had been consciously neglected and disremembered. Her proposition is uniform with the view that the American literary canon had not accepted the African American scholarly achievement. The Black people in America were forced to be silent witness, though they had been part of American life and contributed to American culture through ages. She has dedicated her literary career to ensure that the African experience in America should not be left to be defined by whites. She has been successful in her attempt quite well. The characterization in her fiction unveils the life endured by the black people in the positions designed by Americans.

Her novels are an exploration of the black identity. She tries to find out what it means to be black in white America. Her fiction is chiefly concerned with the complications, sufferings and achievements of black life from the horrors of slavery to the resentful era of racism. She rewrites the African American history with a black perspective. Throughout the novels of slavery and reconstruction period, the blacks in the Anglo and African – American literature represented stereotyped roles. The white literature shaped the complying of black society, to discard those black functions which a society that is white in roots could not confront. The lives of African – American people have been terribly affected by biracial and bicultural conflicts that are forms of societal and psychological restrictions. The structure of American society following racism, demarcates the black as inferior and the white as superior, males as the center and females as the margin. As blacks as a group is denigrated by virtue of its race, a woman is pushed to margin by the virgin of her sex. Black women have been the victims of not only racism and sexism but also class exploitation. The racism in America supposes that the white are more profound and noble due to their whiteness. Moreover, whiteness is associated with beauty and culture, and blackness with ugliness. As blacks served as slaves, they are embodiment of slavery. The chauvinism left the backs & minds of black women with scars, mutilated them psychologically. Consequently, a black female has to suffer from the twofold trauma of white racism and black male sexism. Not only they were derogated through the acrimonious convictions of the domineering racism but also were victimized by black men, as a consequence of phallic superiority.

Biracial and cultural conflicts in America are consequences of Racism, Classicism and Sexism. The economic system of slavery which gave birth to capitalism, paved the way for racism and classicism. Or it can be discerned that Racism and Classicism have their foundation in class-exploitation. Thus, as a source of oppression of blacks, racism, sexism and classicism share dependency on each other and other and arise from the same set of circumstances. Morrison's novels inscribe the author's realization and awareness of the historical conditions of oppression of African people in America, exhibiting her sense of responsibility as writer and her culminated consciousness of the interrelationship of race, gender and class. The emphasis on each fragment varies from novel to novel.

Each of her novels is a story of individualized pain and triumph that reverberates within the larger African-American experience. A contemporary of black women novelists like Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, who have endured to investigate the relationship between race, gender and class. Morrison has succeeded in clarifying the definition of blackness associated with race and class assumptions.

At the beginning of her writing career, she thought racism is the main source of oppression of blacks. A tragic story of child abuse, with race, gender and class mixed in, her very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* is concerned with racial self-loathing, the loss of identity and shame. But gradually, she became aware of the unavoidability of the gender discrimination and found that sexism is equally responsible. The fiction of Morrison acquaints us with the sort of lives black people lead. The situations that they endured and their ensuing reactions make us feel the experiences from the black perspective. The critical approach in her novels advocates the ways for survival in a society where an individual faces concrete and inhuman jeopardy. Her fiction has brought much of the American Experience out of the marginal shadows and has given American Literature, collectively, a more complete finer dimension.

Morrison's very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* is a saga of Afro-American folk tradition. The novel basically deals with the contradictions stimulated by racism, sexism and classicism affecting the black girls in white America. It tackles a difficult subject: racial prejudice and its impact on the victim, focusing on the stereotypes, in particular beauty. *The Bluest Eye* attempts to show terrible consequences for blacks internalizing the morals of a white culture that doesn't honor their presence.

Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world light skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores and so on and on. (Davis 324).

Pecola Breedlove struggles to survive in a society that glorifies whiteness. She longs to have blue eyes for her they are embodiment of beauty and love. She wistfully hoped that the blue eyes will get her the acceptance of the people around. Ultimately she becomes the victim of community's frustration, escaping her sense of ugliness into madness, with an assurance that she is endowed with beautiful blue eyes. The concept of the novel is an evidence that Morrison deliberated racism as the African's primary hindrance. It reflects her low-level consciousness of class exploitation.

In *Sula* Morrison continues to deal with black female experience, but the emphasis shifts from childhood experience to lasting bonding between girls becoming women. The protagonist is an acutely responsive and antagonistic woman whose non acceptance is a censure of the distressful lives of submission other women live. Morrison says in an interview

When creating *Sula*, I had in mind a woman of force, in a way she is distilled. She doesn't stop existing even after she dies. In fact, what she left behind is more powerful after she is dead than when she was alive. (Parker 254)

She grows into an independent woman who is emotionally strong enough to reject behavioral standards of the society she survives in. Consequently, she becomes a transgressor. She needs Nel as she had no center, no speck around which to grow. She had no ego, so she felt no compulsion to verify herself. Nel's character is an antithesis of *Sula's* character. She fears "funky experimentation" and conforms to the beliefs of the folks she belonged to. Both of them appear to be so different but they are so similar. Black female bonding is the pivotal consideration of the novel. By focusing on the young women's bonding Morrison undermines the principled dualities

of the conventional Euro-American belief and challenges the tradition of creating black female characters. The novel was hailed with an unfavourable reception as it came out at a time when the Black Aesthetic Movement called for positive representations and role models. Even though the focus of the novel is on gender bias, the racial issues having roots in slavery, is intertwined into the plot of the novel. The capitalism or class concerns were taken into consideration after gender and race. This clearly evidenced that she found the lack of individual rights as the main cause of the oppression endured by black women.

Published in 1977, *Song of Solomon* deals with an individual's search for identity. Milkman starts his journey chasing for gold that leads to Milkman's discovery of his family's roots and newfound self-esteem. Morrison tells the story with a man's perspective. The story begins and ends with an African-American man trying to experience freedom from societal restrictions by flying. Class in relation to race is more important in this novel as compared to *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Morrison has undermined gender-bias to both racism and class exploitation, realizing that the suppression of American women and men is the consequence of his national and class exploitation. Treading the path of his search for identity, the major impediments he had to face is the deadening effect of capitalism. He is unconsciously pitchforked on his quest for his ownself as a consequence of his desire for gold. The extensive journey leads him back through a personal past to a racial history that had been in contradiction to materialism and greed. This awakening of self-consciousness emancipates him and he begins to feel for his people around him. *Song of Solomon* thus marks a quantitative leap in Morrison's consciousness as an African-American woman writer. She is now more conscious of the fact that Capitalism and racism share interdependency. It is important to remember that such a realization and identification are not enough. Milkman must understand that his awareness of the common oppression of African people as manifested in their history and in their present is relevant only if it is used to struggle against the cause of that oppression. But, unfortunately Milkman sees himself as an African exploited by capitalism and oppressed by racism, but offers no solution to this dilemma. While his race and class-consciousness develop sufficiently to allow him to recreate self, it never reaches the point where he moves beyond self-healing to other-healing. To conclude, her writing of *Song of Solomon* testifies that Morrison has sufficiently matured to understand that while the African's are exploited both racially and economically, his economic exploitation forms the basis for his national oppression.

Capitalist exploitation and race oppression are complementary, for the removal of the first ensures the removal of the other. (Nkrumah 78)

Tar Baby, her fourth novel evidences her maturity to understand that the basic cause of the subjugation of Blacks is the exploitative economic system of Capitalism. The novel is an assimilation of the primary theme of Morrison's earlier works. The focal point of the novel is Jadine's conflict with her African American culture, history and identity. Through the characterization of Jadine, Morrison seeks to point out the dangers that can happen to the totally self-reliant if historically disconnected. The novel can be interpreted as a modern cautionary tale in which Morrison draws on the African-American oral narrative tradition to expose the pitfalls of white middle-class aspirations for the black woman and to illustrate the consequences of her social and cultural misbehavior. The reasons behind Jadine's divided consciousness stems from

her denial of the cultural construction of race and mothering that are part of their African-American heritage.

Her unsuccessful quest for wholeness is the consequence of her acceptance of values and modes of white middle class culture. She rejects the very cultural constructions of race and mothering that could heal and transform her consciousness. Son also struggles with the same trauma. He commits himself to sharing this knowledge with other Africans and struggles to inform his brethren about the political aspirations of capitalism and becomes a disciple for African people, 'a modern-day revolutionary.'

Thus, the individualistic, materialistic Jadine and the roots—bound Son do not mesh. For, Son moves to another world that has least to do with the motives of Jadine and she cops out to her former lifestyle that would eventually bring her to a dead end. Finally, both their solutions are individual and not at all applicable to the concrete realities that their brethren must face every day. At no point does either Son or Jadine succeed to frame a solution to dissolve the group dilemma. Resultantly, *Tar Baby* projects only individual class struggle against capitalism. It manifests Morrison's own clarity in regard to the irreconcilability of the interests of the dominating and the ruled masses. While she clearly rejects altruistic capitalism, she just as clearly rejects the naive prescription of Kenneth Kaunda, President of Zambia, for an African communal socialism, a way of life that seeks to return to a glorified past without the benefit of modern technology, modern sciences or modern consciousness.

Morrison has succeeded in creating yet another work that can be read and reread for insights into human nature in general and into the human condition as it relates to race, class and gender in particular. (Samuels and Weems 110)

BELOVED, Morrison's fifth novel, a triumph, displays her resourcefulness, technical and emotional range. Her creation puts to rest the skepticism regarding her distinction as a pre-eminent American novelist, of her own or any other generation, it turns out to be a hair-raiser. *Beloved* appeared in 1987, Morrison gets the kernel of this novel from the news article entitled "A visit to the slave mother who killed her child". Margaret Garner wanted to save her children from the hands of slavery, her trauma as a slave, made her contemplate slavery worse than death. The article moved the author to pen the novel. She intended to explore the nature of slavery with the perspective of the survived experiences of the slaves themselves. By choosing to narrate the real life and actual experience of a runaway slave woman, Morrison proves the power of art to demolish stereotype.

The book was not about the institutions-Slavery with a capital S. It was about those anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they are willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another—that was incredible to me. (Atlanta Journal p 48)

The story of *Sethe*, the protagonist, is presented piece by piece through the act of rememory, a pattern of revelation of past, of recognition of the history. The novel proposes the need for people, specifically ex-slaves, to deal with their painful pasts in order to heal

themselves. To develop this theme, Morrison tells the story of Sethe, a female ex-slave, who killed her child in order to save her from the horrors of slavery and spent most of her life paying for it. As a slave, she was denied the authority to raise her own offspring, for they were considered property. She had no knowledge or experiences with child raising, on that account her attempt to kill them indicates her affection for them, for she believes that the afterlife has to be better than a return to slavery for them. She struggles with the haunting memory of her slave-past and retribution of Beloved, the ghost of the infant daughter whom she has killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. Sethe sets out to heal her wounds by being a perfect mother. Sethe struggles to make Beloved gainful possession of her present and throws off the long, dark legacy of her past and spends each day trying to compensate and justify herself to Beloved. But gradually the ghost starts consuming her and succeeds in isolating the family from the rest of the African Community pushing it to vulnerability. The family was rescued when the other women of the community come to their aid driving the ghost out of the house. The novel demonstrates that collectivism is the first step in eradicating the biracial and bicultural conflicts caused by class exploitation of African people. Certainly Morrison has come to understand that "capitalism is but the gentleman's form of slavery." (Kwame, 68) The sense of fraternalism helps the characters to survive the terrible occurrences. She puts together isolated struggle with collective struggle and selfish individualism with individualism conditioned by social responsibility. This recognition of social responsibility in African people sharing disinterested devotion to each other makes *Beloved* Morrison's most conscious novel. Toni Morrison uses *Beloved* as a vehicle to propose solidarity as the solution for African people.

After affirming collective class struggle against capitalism in *Beloved* Morrison seems to have realized that the problem of gender oppression, peculiar to women, can be solved only through gender identity. Hence the thematic emphasis is on the unity of women, in her sixth novel *Jazz*, which adds a new dimension to the solution of the African dilemma. Morrison was inspired by the story behind photograph of a dead girl. Dorcas, the character, loved someone else so much more than herself that she was willing to bleed to death rather than reveal her lover's name. This willingness to replace the self with a love object outside of the self is, Morrison says, a way in which women sabotage themselves. The novel explores the struggles with alienation, fragmentation, self and identity in light of the unfulfilled promises of the black migrant urban experience. Joe and Violet were initially dazzled by the prospect of life in New York. Gradually, as the time passed by they encountered the realities that were curtained behind the new life. Though being married to Violet for so many years, he falls in love with Dorcas, who is a teenager, then kills her when she tries to leave him. Dorcas tells the alarmed witnesses not to call an ambulance, even though she would survive if she allowed someone to help her, and she consequently bleeds to death. Everyone knows that Joe shot Dorcas and rumor of their affair begins to spread in the community after the young girl's death. Violet appears unexpectedly at Dorcas' open-casket funeral and slashes Dorcas's face with a knife. Several weeks later, she begins to visit Dorcas's mourning aunt, Alice Manfred, and the two women begin to develop a friendship as a result of their shared tragedy. She recognizes that Dorcas could have been the daughter she never had. Violet's identification of self with the black women like Dorcas gradually leads her to discover the real 'me'. Meeting Violet helps Alice to understand that there is no significant class difference between African women in as much as all face a tripple oppression based on sex, race, and class. The only two classes that exist are the owner class-capitalists-and the ownerless class-workers. Toni Morrison gives a refreshing interpretation to black experience in her novel, *Jazz*. It is the story of African women that Morrison is most to

present in *Jazz*, because it is only they who experience the tripple oppression of gender, race, and class. She takes a current problem facing African people and relates it to problem African women confronted in the 1920 s, and shows that the solution then and now remains the same. All African people were in danger of exploitive conditions caused by the characteristic economy in the 1920 s. As economy moved rapidly from slavery to industrialism the results were the worst race riots in the history of America. When conditions of all African people were barbaric and wild then conditions for African women were warlike. For, unlike African men, African women were also in danger from the sexism that, like racism, is generated by capitalism. As all women come together as black women, and discover their own selves through bonding- with other black women, they come to an end of a pilgrimage to know and be their own true selves. *Jazz* provides a solution of gender solidarity, for the deadlock of African women. She keeps her commitment as a novelist by suggesting the need for sisterhood in the African community.

Her first publication after winning the Nobel Prize, *Paradise*, her seventh novel, is testament to the power of the imagination in creating a living past. *Paradise* tells a complex tale of the history and ancestry of a town and the way it becomes inextricably linked with a mansion on its outer limits. "Paradise" is a portrayal of African-American domestic and community life a quarter-century ago, that poses an extreme opposition to the Convent, a shelter for women. Morrison's fictional Ruby is the pseudo representation of Haven, an all-black town in Oklahoma that had been founded after Reconstruction by late 19th-century migrants from Louisiana. Haven's "8-rock" – dark black people of firm belief that deprived them of the association with other African-Americans. As a result, their successors in Ruby fear outsiders and are threatened by the presence of Convent. Ruby and the Convent are ideal perfections that discordingly meet over the course of their histories. Eventually, incidents happen that accidentally lead Morgans and other 8-rock descendants to act. They blame the Convent's people for unholy behavior. The crafty pseudo macrocosm of Ruby's history, bearing witness to the wretchedness of Reconstruction and desperation of the Depression, reveal the destructive and flawed traits of human. Consequentially, the haughtiness of aforethought isolation marginates Ruby's traditionalists to fire upon those whom they are supposed to defend. The novel is a powerful and descriptive examination of racial community in the late 20th century, ostensibly proposing, that a real piece of heaven on earth is both black and white, male and female, and open to the world. Through her word-picture of Ruby, Morrison contravenes the ideologies of isolation that glamorize communities based exclusion, even when that isolation is a response to racial violence. Peter Widdowson rightly says,

Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America . . . and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honor (324)

The novel proposes that history, having its roots in violence preserves itself without revising annihilating attempts that motivate it. Morrison has expended the concept of a "paradise" based on riddance, as a way to criticize American history and rewritten non-biblical sources to visualize a future in which patriarchy, racism, and colonialism are uprooted through the resurgence of suppressed cultural myths. She labors to create new myths that could provide the foundation for social change.

Paradise represents a new take on both the tradition of American exceptionalism and the African American cultural tradition.

Inrelation to the former, [Morrison's] deconstruction of the self-conscious perfection underpinning the exceptionalist tradition implies that, unlike other writers of the tradition, she doesn't reinscribe the national American dream theoretically. In relation to the latter, her deconstruction of Ruby's exceptionalism figures as a warning that the mechanisms of violence and marginalization are also at work in counter-discursive national historical narratives. (Dalsgard, 246)

Following on the heels of paradise, *Love*, her eighth novel, tells the tale of free slaves driven across the country until they were able to settle and build their own town. All was as it should be in their "paradise" until over time it became a painful form of hell. Bill Cossey, a beguiling entrepreneur dreamt of catering blacks with a "pre-integration playground and haven". Although he's been dead for 25 years, he's still alive for Heed and Christine, women who are convoluted in an unfriendly and mean bond in the Cossey house, conjuring over his legacy. Morrison forks up an agitating chronicle of the turmoil that results when young women are deprived of the parental love and guidance that they deserve. With *Love*, Ms. Morrison conveys the universal and timeless importance of communication, self-esteem, relationships and human nature that transcend gender and race. Morrison develops her female characters as explorations of how self-hood develops in relation to specifically African-American concerns. Morrison is aware of the place historically assigned to black women and refuses to be influenced by the accepted roles ascribed to them. She attempts to delineate her female characters as subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival. The female characters, in *Love*, are devoid of parenting and respectable sexual identity due to the inability of their families to overcome racial adversity. Morrison's depiction of "female characters searching for love, for valid sexual encounters, and, above all, for a sense that they are worthy" (Bakersman 541) is manifest in Heed, Christine, and Junior. Additionally, class is positioned as a central issue to the sexual identities of the main female characters in *Love*. They suffer through a lack of opportunity, and crave to be accepted, making attempts to achieve social respect, at the expense of their sexuality. Inadvertently they commit to a form of slavery to seek for a fake sense of security. Morrison further exhibits the failure of Civil Rights movement in improving the lives of many African American women.

We can say in the course of thirty years Morrison comes to terms with the dilemma confronting African people in America. Her fiction evidences the facts that blacks in America suffer from a psychological and crisis that stems from prolonged oppression of race, gender and class. Each successive novel reflects her growing understanding of the racial and cultural conflicts as a root cause of dilemma. For Morrison,

The work must be political. It must have that as its thrust The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at same time." (Guthrie 3)

She also purports that the solution to the African's plight lies in sisterhood, gender solidarity and collective class struggle against capitalism. Thus, Morrison's novels contemplate an evolutionary pattern in theme and structure that is concurrent with her own growing class-consciousness. Morrison's novels can be considered, as Robert Stepto suggests,

An intertexture call and response, a progressive trooping of her own work in other works, each Morrison novel in progression is an increasingly bold and original re-voicing of her previous concerns. (Stepto 60)

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