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## A Thematic Study of Toni Morrison's *Home*

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### **Abstract:**

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison is not only a leading African – American woman novelist but also one of the most significant and relevant writers on the literary scene today. She has been amply recognised for her combined greatness as a voice for black people and as a master craftsperson of the dominant literary artistic form. While numerous themes can be found woven deep into each of Morrison's novels some of the most prevalent are racism, sexism, lust, gender and identity crisis.

Her latest novel *Home* (2012) depicts the story of Frank Money, 24 year old Korean War Veteran, as he starts his reluctant journey home. But where and what is home? The title of the novel is very striking and interesting. It has a deep symbolic meaning too. It gives an emotional attachment to its readers. Morrison has presented a simple theme of 'identity crisis' in a very beautiful and artistic way. This novel is not only of identity crisis but of humanity with a universal appeal, which ends in a symbolic manner finally finding home (grave), to an unknown dead man whose murder was watched by Frank in his childhood. The story starts after receiving a letter informing Frank that his younger sister's life is in danger and the whole novel takes turn from this point.

**Keywords: Alienation, Identity Crisis, Racism, Symbolism, Bonding of Relations.**

Toni Morrison (1931- ) inherits a unique ability to create layers of significant meanings in her works. Her creations are not only rich in themes but she also masters in creating dynamic plots. Apart from the many particular themes that apply to specific novels, Morrison also runs many common themes prevalent in American setup in her novels. By taking a closer look at some of these common themes-such as racial tension, sexism, alienation, classism etc-it is evident that Morrison is extremely dedicated in her writing and quite successful in reflecting an overall message of harmony, left for the readers to discover in the end.

Morrison's longstanding greatness resides in her ability to animate specific stories about the Black experiences and simultaneously voice all her experience. It's precisely by committing absolutely to the first that she's able to transcend the circumscribed audience it might imply. She writes about psychological violence with an engineer's accuracy and a poet's expansiveness. That's what makes works like *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987) so hard to put down. Readers of her novels have to be willing chambers of sadness, and witness graphic scenes of conflict and disillusionment that are both particular to the African-American experience and universal in their symbolism. She writes about the suffering, challenges and pain of Black Community especially of females but she is also regarded as a skilled psychologist who draws the inner and outer conflict of her characters very realistically.

From her first novel *The Bluest Eye* to the latest *Home* (2012), she has presented the dilemma and trauma of characters in an incredible way. Such is the case with her latest, all-too-brief, 145 page novel, *Home* the story of a traumatized young, black Korean war veteran who returns from the battle field in a psychic haze, only to confront the perils of racism and oppression in his native country. The work's accomplishment lies in its considerable capacity to make us feel that we are not only resident but co-owner of, and collectively accountable for, this land we call home.

One of Morrison's strongest qualities is her ability to wield symbols better than any other writer. With the latest novel (which is really a novella masquerading as a longer work) she places the symbol and the notion of 'home' under great scrutiny. Though it is simple in its title and theme, yet the complexity of the prose and the ideas are confronted when go through the story. To every individual and family, the term 'home' is at once universal and decidedly specific; it is a unique physical place as well as a concept that we all understand. As banal as it may seem, the gap between the terms 'house' and 'home' become essential to the bifurcated journeys of main characters Frank and Cee Money. In many of her novels she has chosen female characters as the main protagonists like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula and Nel in *Sula*, Sethe in *Beloved* and in many other novels. But her latest novel *Home* is a male centred story which moves around the main character Frank Money.

The title of the novel is very simple, striking and interesting. It gives an emotional connectivity to its readers. Home is the symbol of shelter, love, care and togetherness. Home is very essential in human life. In this novel Morrison has pointed out what happens when one becomes homeless, aimless and hopeless and leads the life of a vagabond. Home is the identity of our existence. Not only when we are alive we require a shelter but also when we die we need a specific place (grave) to maintain our identity after death. This message is presented in a very beautiful, psychological and heart touching manner by Toni Morrison. This novel is also the story of a brother who starts his unknown journey to save his younger sister's life who is the only reason of his life, "She was the first person I ever took responsibility for; down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself" (Morrison, *Home* 104). *Home* begins with a short chapter in the first person, narrated by Frank Money, who is suffering from memory loss. He reminisces about his childhood with his sister Cee in Lotus, Georgia. *Home* tells the story of Frank Money, 24 year-old Korean War veteran, as he embarks a reluctant journey home.

Frank and his sister Cee are both completely alienated characters of the story. They had an orphaned childhood as their parents were nearly absent from their lives, always busy in earning their livelihood. Cee, being very, small was 'looked over' (also in the literal way) by her step grandmother who infused the sense of inferiority in the poor girl. They had a radically uprooted family artificially placed in an unknown environment where all they had was sense of alienation and homelessness.

When Frank was four years old his family and neighbours were kicked out of their homes in Bandera county Texas because they were Black. They moved to Georgia. At that time Frank's mother Ida was pregnant. Frank remembers this time as one of the most difficult time of his life when they were homeless and jobless. They have to leave their household goods, pet animals, fields, property and home. Through Frank Morrison has presented a very heart touching scene, "Mama cried, but the baby she carried was more important than kettles, canning jars, and bedding." (39) On the way his mother gave birth to a girl child whose name was Cee (Ycidra). Frank's family reached to Lotus, Georgia where they lived in home of

their grandfather, Salem and step grandmother, Lenore. Cee was badly treated and hated by Lenore because she was born on road, “Lenore took it as a very bad sign for Cee’s future that she was born on the road” (44). Frank’s parents start to work as field workers to earn the livelihood. It was Frank who looked after little Cee in their absence. When Frank went off to serve Korean War Cee ran away with a boy named Prince. They left Lotus and went to Atlanta by Lenore’s car which they borrowed from her. After sometime Prince left Cee and ran away with the car, for which he married to her. Being afraid of Lenore’s anger Cee decided to live in Atlanta and not to go to Lenore’s home. She searches a job of an assistant to a white doctor named Dr. White.

Frank was serving in Korean War with his two childhood friends Mike and Stuff who were killed in the war. These two deaths shook Frank badly. He considers himself responsible for their death. He thinks that he could not save their lives. Feeling of guilt always haunts him. Another incident which horrified Frank was a little Korean girl who was shot dead by Frank who had come to steal food from the dump. This girl reminded him of Cee. One day the girl touched Frank’s Crotch and he shot the girl in the face. Later he accepts that the little girl aroused his desire he feared that he would act on his desire that’s why he killed the girl, “how could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn’t know was in me?” (134)

After returning from the Korean War Frank describes how he became homeless and jobless. He had no fixed direction in his life. He had been drinking and gambling most of the time. During this period he met a girl Lily, who was working at a dry cleaner’s shop. Lily and Frank started a relationship. Their relationship was glorious at first but it soon fall apart. Lily realized that Frank was still traumatized by his experience in the Korean War. According to Lily Frank seemed to have no goals in life. For Frank she was the most important thing in his life, “It was the third woman who changed everything. In her company the little wishbone V took up residence in my own chest and made itself at home” (68). But soon he receives a letter which informs that Cee is in some kind of trouble and her life is in danger. She will die if he does not rescue her, “Come fast, she be dead if you tarry.” (8). He leaves Lily to save his sister’s life. He thinks that he would still be with Lily if he had not received that letter. For Frank, Cee is the only family he has left. He tells himself that Cee’s safety is his responsibility. Even as a child, he always take care of her when she was badly treated by her step grandmother Lenore, “He was always protecting her as though she were his pet kitten” (88). During his journey to Atlanta Frank spends most of his time thinking about the experiences and episodes of his past life. As he thinks all this he repeatedly catches glimpse of a small man wearing a zoot suit who does not seem to be real. Frank goes to Atlanta at Doctor Scott’s home where he finds Cee laying unconscious on an examine table. The doctor has been feeding Cee drugs and performing mysterious surgical researches on her body. It was Sarah an employee and friend of Cee who sent that letter to Frank informing that Cee’s life was in danger. Frank returns to Lotus, Georgia with Cee, where she is cured by the women of Lotus. After a couple of months she gets full recovery but was unable to bear any child.

Morrison uses couple of incidents that provided a haunting background to the alienated and guilty souls of Frank and Cee. Racism encompasses the novel like a ghostly power. Frank Money who is a black boy is the victim of racism remembers an incident which happened in his childhood. One evening when he was with his younger sister returning to home saw a group of white men pushing a dead body of a black man in a wheelbarrow into a hole. “...we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting.” (Home 4) This incident chases Frank throughout his life as a shadow. The novel ends the same point

from where it began. This incident haunts Frank for the rest of his life until he makes up his mind to identify the buried corpse. His grandfather Salem reveals that Black men used to be forced to fight each other to the death for the entertainment of Whites. He tells a story that before ten or fifteen years ago a boy, Jerome, from Alabama, who was forced to kill his own father. The father unable to face the idea of killing of his own son demanded that Jerome kill him instead, and Jerome did so. The novel ends with Frank fulfilling his duty of digging a proper grave for this dead man and performing the rites on his skeleton. Frank nails a marker on the tree, ‘‘Here stands a man’’ (145). Conceptually bringing a homeless soul to rest is the central idea behind the novel. The most interesting thing is that the novel ends in a symbolic manner. Frank buries the unknown black old man who could not get an honourable death and grave. Frank gives him a proper place (grave) that was the home of dead man. At last Frank and Cee get their own home which was full of care, love and bonding of relations.

Through this novel Morrison has again depicted the pain and suffering of Black people who are tortured by White people. These innocent people become the victim of the cruelty of white folk. The childhood of Frank and Cee was spent like refugees who have to leave their home because of the reason that they were Black. Frank’s girlfriend Lily wanted to buy a house for a down payment but she was not allowed to buy because she was Black. Another touching point which is raised by the novelist is that she has presented a pathetic scene where Black people are forced to fight like animals and kill each other for the amusement of white people. Like her other novels Morrison has interwoven themes like neighbourhood, women bonding, superstition, and identity crisis in the present novel.

Whole novel runs in first person and third person narration. The novel ends not only in a symbolic manner but in a humanistic manner with universal appeal. In a starred review, Publishers Weekly described Morrison’s novel as, ‘‘[b]eautiful, brutal, as is Morrison’s perfect prose.’’ Leah Hager Cohen writes in the New York Times, ‘‘this work’s accomplishment lies in its considerable capacity to make us feel that we are each not only resident but co-owner of, and collectively accountable for, this land we call home.’’ According to Herman Melville, all voyages are homeward bound. Whether or not this is true, it is a fact that several of the most important epics in Western Literature employ the theme of returning home. As Frank Money is a war hero (he earned a medal for his military service abroad), we might see him as an updated version of Odysseus or Aeneas, and just like the epic poems in which their tales were immortalized, we join Frank’s narrative *in medias res*, shortly after he returns ‘‘home’’ from war. There are many trials and tribulations (problems with alcohol, a lack of money, a few violent outbursts and a run-in with the cops) that Frank must confront on the road to South Georgia. These tests not only underscore his mid-century American odyssey, but they also intensify the ambivalence he feels toward the place of his youth and the people still occupying that town.

Although time experimented with over the course of the narrative, there is a nice and natural story arc with which Morrison fleshes out some of her larger ideas. The exploration of one’s homecoming not only celebrates the return of Frank to his community; it also resonates on a larger socio historical level. Home presents a vision of return that is not predicted on regression. When Frank and Cee eventually reunite and take up occupancy in the rented house abandoned by their itinerant parents, they are changed individuals whose unique experiences have altered their views and behaviours somewhat. The important distinction that Morrison makes, though, is that thus by making Frank Money a lower-class soldier instead of some kind of modernized Odysseus, Morrison not only extends her tradition of telling the stories of the voiceless and the forgotten, but she also champions and campaigns for the

values of one's own people, of one's own roots respective metamorphoses cannot sever the bonds they share with their community and with each other.

*Home* is not just a song about the arms and the man from Lotus, Georgia; it is a call to action, a goading work reminding its readers to tend to their own gardens, to turn back toward their own communities, and to repair the dilapidated structures of this land. In the end, *Home* is also a return to form for Morrison. The novella is fuelled by the potent blend of fact and fantasy about times gone by, but the objective is both contemporary and eternal. There are few themes as immutable as the quest for home and there have been very few moments in our recent history when this notion could be discussed without cynicism. As conservative idea as the preservation or restoration of home may seem to some readers, Morrison eludes this sort of reading by showing how radical the reinvention and rediscovery of home can be.

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