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Empowered Women of Toni Morrison

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Abstract:

Over the years, Race, Class, Gender, and Identity have undeniably been the themes in black women's writing. Toni Morrison has succeeded in tracing the development of black women's image and identity from its early imperceptible stage to its current stage of self-definition. She has brought to light, how these women really struggled to ascertain their self-identity, searching for freedom from their traditional roles. In her novels *Sula* (1973), *Home* (1992) and *Beloved* (1987) and *Tar Baby* (1981), Toni Morrison examines the important role that race and gender play in the lives of her female characters. The theme of oppression has been one of the greatest elements of Black fiction. With the advent of the feminist movement in the 1970s, the most important move has been from race to gender. In these three novels, the protagonists are examples of empowered women of Morrison, in contrast to the exploited women in other novels such as *The Bluest Eye*.

The black community has conflicting concepts about gender roles and black women's work. Toni Morrison's novels represent the predicament of Afro-American women. The more agonizing aspect is that even their own black men join hands with other non-Afro-American autocrats in suppressing the black women. The unjust world revealed by Morrison shows the loss of identity of Afro-American people and the quest for their identity; however in this world, black women remain more browbeaten and fraught. To survive in this oppressive world, the black protagonists of her novels violate and disrupt the rules of oppressive system and recover the human potential denied to blacks. This is female empowerment and is the result of metamorphosis of life of black women. This transformation is imperative for the survival of black community in the white world. The transformation happened through education and enhancement of black culture and unity. It may have been impossible to bring up this unity without stressing the need to go back in time to visualize the struggles their ancestors went

through. Remembering ancestors and passing on the black tradition needs good natured women and mothers who should be careful enough to teach the younger generation, what they need to know.

Keywords: Empowerment, suppression, gender, racism, self-reliance.

Introduction

Empowerment means accepting and allowing people, who are on the outside of the decision-making process into it. Women's empowerment is the process in which women elaborate and recreate what it is that they can be, do, and accomplish in a circumstance that they previously were denied [1]. It is the process for women to redefine gender roles that allows for them to acquire the ability to choose between known alternatives whom have otherwise been restricted from such an ability. Women's economic empowerment refers to the ability for women to enjoy their right to control and benefit from the resources, assets, income and their own time, as well as the ability to manage risk and improve their economic status and well-being.

Identity for the black woman can be studied at three levels. These levels interact with one another and they are race, culture and gender. Racially the blacks do not fit into the American community which has the white dominant race that continues to treat the blacks as slaves and inhuman creatures. But the blacks had a racial past of their own and they strived hard, in vain to establish their identity in a Martian society. The black woman suffers from the double disadvantages of being black and female. The black woman was subjected to all sorts of physical and psychological abuse. They had the undesirable status of working animal and were also the objects of brutal and perverse desire. She occupied the lowest position in the social scale and struggled for both freedom and selfhood. Possibly no other community in human history has ever underwent from such socio-economic physical, cultural and sexual torment and anguishes like the Afro-American women. Being poor, black and female, the Afro-American woman had to generate her own definition in order to survive and to empower racial identity.

Home

The novel *Home* is inspirational in that it depicts a man's near-broken spirit during the very hetero-normative culture of the 1950s. Morrison seems to question our conventional ideas of a pre-Civil Rights America. But in doing so, she also casts a troubled glance at black

masculinity. Frank's subordinate rank on the front lines, for instance, seems to typify and emphasize dominant racial pyramids. *Home* is an Odyssean repatriation story on a less-than-epic scale. Frank Money is a twenty-four-year-old Korean War trouper, traveling home to rescue his sister Cee from an unknown disaster. He receives an unidentified letter that reads, "*Come fast. She be dead if you tarry.*" In order to save his sister, though, Frank must revisit his Georgian hometown that he considers "*the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield.*" He remembers from his childhood a black father and son potholed against one another in a horrifying fight to the death. And yet his hometown is not all that haunts him. A traumatic experience with a young Korean girl has left him broken, purposeless, and emotionally disturbed. The journey home, then, becomes not only an attempt to save his ill-fated sister but also a desperate effort to resuscitate his sense of manhood.

This theme of female empowerment becomes readily ostensible in the conversation between Ethel Fordham, the woman who fostered Cee back to health, and Cee. Cee had just been saved by her brother, Frank, and brought back to their "home" in the city of Lotus. Cee, profoundly sedated, was on the brink of death due to her employer's ruthless medical investigations on her genitalia. With no other options, Frank is forced to become contingent on the women in the community of Lotus to save Cee's life. In the "final stage" of Cee's recovery the women insist that she sits with her legs spread open facing the sun for one hour each day. Cee is mortified and annoyed and can only find solace in Ethel's nurturing words. Ethel explains,

See what I mean? Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (Home 126)

In this passage, Morrison antagonizes the issue of the Afro-American female identity and the "limitation[s]" that encompass being "young and a woman." Ethel strongly emboldens Cee to be self-reliant, and not to let "nothing and nobody" save her but herself. Ethel teaches Cee to not let the oppression of others determine her self-worth or define her identity, as it is a form of mental "slavery." Morrison strategically utilizes the word "free" in this passage to refer to Cee's

new found opportunity for growth and development. Cee is limited as a young woman, but foremost is a “person” and should not let the limits of her gender determine her strength and ability.

By selecting to support her novel in this way, Morrison is able to draw the distinction between the positive, community oriented, and supportive female characters and the emasculated, isolated and destructive male characters. Frank Money suffers alone with the mental oppression of his gender and race. Often feeling secluded, helpless, and socially rejected, Frank is forced to bear his oppression with little comfort from the other male characters in the novel. All the while, Cee is nurtured, encouraged, and protected by the other women in the community. These notions of emasculation and female empowerment provide an perceptive contrast that eventually draw’s Morrison’s readers to the expected conclusion, that gender and racial equivalence are essential for a healthy “person” as well as a healthy community.

Sula

Sula, published in 1973 in New York, is Toni Morrison's second novel. The Novel was set in the early 1900s in a small Ohio town called Medallion, it tells the story of two African-American friends, Sula and Nel, from their childhood through their adulthood and Sula's death. Morrison drew on her own smalltown, Midwestern childhood to create this tale of conformity and rebellion. Morrison began writing *Sula* in 1969, a time of great activism among African Americans and others who were working toward equal civil rights and opportunities.

The book addresses issues of racism, bigotry, and suppression of African Americans. Toni Morrison’s *Sula* lays bare the rigid personality of a pariah, the title character who refuses to succumb to the codes, values and standards of both the dominant culture and her immediate environment. During an era in which the role of the Black woman is clearly and stiflingly defined, Sula is determined to be herself. She refuses to accept the conventional boundaries of her race and gender, by rejecting the mores of the outside world as well as those of her own community, Sula stands alone.

Residing with her mother, Hannah, in the house of her grandmother, Eva Peace, Sula initially draws her world view from both women. However, her inability to find meaning in the prescribed domestic roles of the women of the Bottom coupled with her desire to be “distinctly

different” makes Sula live out her own fantasies, create her own realities and set her own objectives. She is motivated by a firm sense of “Me – Ness”. A desire to surpass the sterile soil of the Bottom, coupled with her need for independence lead Sula away from it.

Unconventional, "wild", and complex, Sula is often a disturbing character who sometimes seems to be driven by negative qualities. Nel, on the other hand, is a more conventional character, possessing many qualities that make her seem somehow better, nicer, or more respectable than Sula. Both women are searching for themselves and meaning in life during the course of the novel. Sula is a brave girl. During her childhood, when a group of boys try to mock at them, she acts instantaneously. She slashes off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate.

She raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” Sula did so to threaten the four white boys who always troubling Nel and other black girls. This is an example of her bravery. Surely she is an empowered woman of Morrison. She does not surrender; rather she is stubborn and meets all her needs without major hassles.

To fill up the emptiness in her life Sula scornfully uses and abandon men. She appears to have no purpose in life but self-gratification. She has ruined the life of her only friend but cannot understand Nel’s grief. Sula responds to an inner voice. She ignores the conventions of the society. Sula rebels against her family, the community and a world controlled by men. Sula wanted to follow her life the way she liked. Her experience taught her that she could depend on none other than self. She responds to an inner void.

When Sula returns to Medallion after ten years looking fine and wearing city clothes, she appears much younger than her Medallion counter parts. When she meets her grandmother, Eva scowls and frowns at her, suggesting that she needs to get married and raise a family. Sula replies, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” Eva retorts that a woman has no business “floating” around without a man. Sula is different from anyone the townspeople have ever known, and because she is not seeking money or material gain, she feels she has an obligation to explain her actions. She refuses to settle for the “colored woman’s” lot.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is warm, subjective, uninhibited and irrational. She is a free spirit who is not bound by external conventions and values. She declared to Nel.

. *I sure did live in this world.* "Really," *What have you got to show for it? "Show?" To who? Girl, I got my mind and what goes on in it.*" (*Sula* 131)

Here, Sula clearly suggested that she is liable to no one but herself for the direction of her life. Her determination to assume responsibility for self is indicated by her determined avowal "I got my mind" the creative assertion that wills what one wishes. Sula is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, retorting resourcefully to found things. Sula is improvisational, audacious, disruptive, creative, contemporary, out-of-the-house, proscribed, uncontained and uncontainable and dangerously female.

Beloved

The Novel *Beloved* is based on the true story of a black slave woman, Margaret Garner, who in 1856 escaped from a Kentucky plantation with her husband, Robert, and their children. They sought refuge in Ohio, but their owner and law officers soon caught up with the family. Before their recapture, Margaret killed her young daughter to prevent her return to slavery. In the novel, Sethe is also a ardently dedicated mother, who flees with her children from an abusive owner known as "schoolteacher." They are caught, and, in an act of supreme love and sacrifice, she too tries to kill her children to keep them from slavery.

Beloved's main character, Sethe, kills her daughter and tries to kill her other three children when a group arrives in Ohio to return them to Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from which Sethe recently fled. A woman supposed to be her daughter, called Beloved, returns years later to haunt Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati. The story opens with an introduction to the ghost: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." The book concerns the story of Sethe and her daughter Denver after their escape from slavery. Their home in Cincinnati is haunted by a revenant, whom they believe to be the ghost of Sethe's daughter. Because of the haunting—which often involves objects being thrown around the room—Sethe's youngest daughter Denver is shy, friendless, and housebound, and her sons, Howard and Buglar, have run away from home by age 13. Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe's husband Halle, dies in her bed soon afterward.

Sethe is an iron-willed, iron-eyed woman, is haunted not only by the ghost of her dead daughter but also by the memories of her life as a slave. While she has been mutilated by the physical violence of schoolteacher's nephews, she seems even more deeply disturbed by her discovery that most white people view her as nothing more than an animal. She asserts her humanity through her determination to reach freedom and to give her children a free life. Her escape from Sweet Home demonstrates the force of her will to overcome impossible circumstances and foreshadows the desperate measures that she'll take to keep her children from becoming slaves.

Sethe is the fugitive slave whose love for her children and hatred of slavery causes her to commit an absurd act in order to keep her children free from a life of suppression. In Sethe's mind, killing her children to save them from slavery is the ultimate expression of a mother's love. The act of killing her daughter, in order to save her from the clutches of slavery is an illustration of her brave decision. It speaks of her determined mind. She is self-reliant and motivated enough to decide for herself. Truly this action shows, she is an empowered woman of Morrison. Feeling entitled to make your own decisions creates a sense of empowerment. Sethe was only trying to save her daughter from a worse destiny. Sethe says herself, "*It aint my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible*" (*Beloved* 165). That line alone certainly justifies Sethe's actions.

Tar Baby

Jadine is the protagonist of *Tar Baby*. She is very similar to Sula and she is an example of Morrison's empowered woman. She decides for herself. She is strong and self-reliant. She feels estranged from her race and also feels at odds with the traditional roles for women. She longs to discover a way of living her life that ignores the constraints of race or gender, and this desire helps motivate her move to Europe from the island. But circumstances and other characters continually impede her efforts to escape the restrictions of being a black woman. Her upbringing and education have made her feel most comfortable around white, European culture. But even as she enjoys this white culture, she worries about whether she will become disloyal to her race if she stays in Europe, continues to pursue the largely white-run modeling industry. Early on in the novel, a black woman in a yellow dress spits on Jadine, because Jadine lacks an authentic black identity. This experience reflects Jadine's nervousness about her racial identity. In spite of this

nervousness about her racial identity, she is mentally strong enough to combat the hurdles of black women oppression. Although Jadine is black, she is very different from the other black characters in the novel in terms of thoughts, passions, possessions, and family connections.

Jadine is also very different from the other women in the novel in that she rejects the maternal role. She does not want to be a mother, but she feels anxious and guilty about rejecting this role. She is an illustration of Morrison's empowered woman.

Discussion

Feminists have raised their voice against the subordinate position accorded to women under patriarchy. In order to contest the diminished status of women, feminist theory distinguishes between biological sex and socially constructed gender. However, neither feminism nor African American criticism has been able to do justice to the black women's experience that has been expounded by black women authors.

These concerns about "othering" not only due to racism but also due to gender are evident in Morrison's fiction. Female agency, the ability of a woman to act for herself, the capacity of a woman to make the choice to act, is prevalent in her works. Julian Wolfreys, Kenneth Womack and Ruth Robbins define agency as "the ability to act on the world on one's own behalf or the extent to which one is empowered to act by the various ideological frameworks within which one operates" [2].

After nearly four centuries of oppression, having been raped, murdered, lynched, spit upon, pushed through back doors, denied human respect, thought of and treated as sluts and mummies and Negresses, fit only to breed and suckle babies, to wash and cook and scrub and sweat, after having been sexually depersonalized and taken bodily for the having, the Negro women of the modern era are just beginning to be recognized as human beings, as sexual creatures clothed in their own personal skins, as American citizens with public rights and duties, private longings and desires, like any other citizens of their public.

Toni Morrison's greatest accomplishment is that she has raised her novels above the social realism that too many black novels and women's novels are trapped in. She has succeeded in writing about race and women symbolically. The four novels, discussed above portray some of the empowered women of Morrison. Sula and Eva in the novel *Sula*, Ethel in *Home*, Sethe in

Beloved and Jadine of *Tar Baby* are truly self-sustaining and reliant on themselves. They fight for their survival and succeeded in their venture. Though Morrison's novel illustrates a lot of submissive and oppressed women, these women, have fought in the oppressed world to show the world, who they are and what they are capable of. They form examples to the other suppressed women and their life is a model for others to imbibe. Morrison exhorts her anger and views through these characters.

Conclusion

The complexity of the black female situation yields a multiplicity of identities based on race, class, gender, education, and sexuality. There ought to be more than a single monumental theory or approach to explain this complicated dilemma, as the casting weight of any one critical theory leaves room for crookedness and inadequacy. The study of black women, therefore, definitely calls for a determinedly feminist reading of the novels. This divide between those who yearn for a better life and those trapped in a deadening struggle for mere survival is a familiar one in Morrison novels, which is evident in all these three novels. Many of her characters are so beaten down by the burdens of poverty or familial dysfunction. They are heightened by the historical weight, in some cases, of slavery and racial persecution. They seem confined in a slew of passivity and despond, content with, or resigned to, a life of mere endurance. Others are boosted; by love, by determination or by the centrifugal forces of history to seek an identity or a place in the world beyond.

Women's empowerment and achieving gender equality is essential for our society to ensure the sustainable development of the community. These four women of Morrison are different. They were not submissive. They are the empowered women of Morrison.

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