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Search For Self-Identity and Existence in Afro-American Culture Exhibited in The Novels of Tony Morrison

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison is a celebrated writer among 20th-century novelists. She is one of the contemporary black writers who have made her unique identity by presenting the plight and conditions of Afro-American society and the sensibility of the tribal community. She has always shown her special concern for the Black women in the American way of life and modern civilization, searching for their identity and existence. In her novels, she has presented the historical transformation of the females' self in a society where they are marginalized and facing even the denial of their right to live. Almost all of her novels like *The Bluest Eye*(1970), *Sula*(1973), *Tar Baby*(1981), *Beloved* (1979) *Song of Solomon* (1987), etc., she explore the quest of their female protagonists for their true self and their identity. Living at the fringe of the American society, these women are presented asking for the right to be a part of it rather than an important one which they actually deserve. The purpose of the present paper is to analyze the novels of Toni Morrison in the light of the feminine search for self and identity exhibited by her female protagonists in her major novels.

Keywords: self, search for identity, existence, black, racial.

Introduction:

Toni Morrison shows deep feelings for the Afro-American tribal community, especially for women, who were the victims of the changing and existing social and racial differences. They inspired the writings of Tony Morrison to a great extent and the wrong notions of the

victims of the historical transformation, who were to be the subject of her novels. With her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she achieved name and fame and stated her feminine search for self very clearly. She achieved National Book Critics Circle Award for her work *Song of Solomon* (1977), Pulitzer Prize (1988) for *Beloved*, and the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993.

She has presented her concern for the Black women and her search for love and identity, as she says:

“You’re turning over your whole life to him. Your whole life, girl. And if it means so little to you that you can just give it away, hand it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can’t value you more than you value yourself.”

(—Song of Solomon)

Search For Identity and Love in *The Bluest Eye*:

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison's first novel in which she made her feminist manifesto very clear was published in 1970 and was based on the backdrop of the Great Depression of 1941. The novel tells the story of Pecola, an Afro-American girl living in Lorain, Ohio (the hometown of the writer herself). Through the story of Pecola, Toni Morrison raises issues like racism, child molestation, search for self identity etc. This novel is a great document, describing the plight of those Black girls, who wander in search for their identity and who becomes the victim of a rotten social prejudice about the physical beauty of a female and bad family environment. Pecola is a voice that has been suppressed and crushed by her own family and which has never been heard outside the four walls of her house. The main narrator of the story is Claudia MacTeer, who is a nine year old girl living with her ten year old sister Frieda and her parents in Lorain, Ohio. They also have a nine year old foster child, a black girl Pecola Breedlove who is forced to live with them temporarily, after her house was set on fire by her alcoholic and abusive father Cholly Breedlove. Pecola's childhood has been very sad and troubled. She is constantly reminded about her 'ugliness' and that she has no identity like the 'white girls' in her school, her neighbourhood and society. Pecola develops a misconception in her mind that if she had the Blue eyes, perhaps she would have gained social acceptance. Tony Morrison beautifully uses the metaphor of 'Blue eyes' to express the discrimination prevalent in

the Afro-American society and the hatred and inferiority complex in the Black community that develop wrong notions to get identity. Pecola did not get the due love and care from her family, which every child deserves. It is a very frustrating situation that her parents Cholly and Pauline Breedlove were so busy in their fights that they did not consider it necessary to pay any attention to Pecola. Pauline is frustrated because after marrying Cholly, she realised that he is an alcoholic and sexually abusive man. She does not feel any attachment for her home or her children and instead she tries to find her identity in the service of a white Anglo – Saxon Protestant community. She works as a maidservant for a wealthy white family, where she feels some solace as she wants to forget the abusive Cholly and the dark atmosphere of her home. But in the midst of all this, Pecola is left alone and one day, after her house gets repaired, she returns to live with her parents in her unhappy home. She was cleaning utensils in the kitchen in her mother's absence and Cholly, her father comes into the kitchen in the state of drunkenness. He doesn't even recognize Pecola and rapes her. Cholly leaves her half-dead on the kitchen floor and walks away. Pauline returns and finds Pecola in a miserable state on the kitchen floor. However, instead of believing Pecola's story she beats her and ignores the serious crime committed by her husband Cholly Breedlove. This only encourages Cholly and after this incident Pecola becomes like a living corpse whose mother has no concern for her, no matter what happens. The result of the sexual assault by Cholly was that Pecola became pregnant. She is looked down upon in her school, her friends and relatives and in her community. Pecola holds her ugliness responsible for the wrong treatment she received. It seems to her that if she had been beautiful, her mother would have loved her.

“It had occurred to Pecola sometime ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights, if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.”

(The Bluest Eye)

She goes to Soaphead Church for help, where a cunning man, pretending to be a spiritual healer, helps Pecola in getting the blue eyes. He asks her to give a piece of meat to a dog, which was mixed with poison which eventually kills the dog. Pecola thinks that now her wish will be fulfilled and with that her mental condition begins to deteriorate rapidly. In this crucial time Pecola is supported only by Claudia and Frieda who tries to help her and wait for the arrival of

her baby. Toni Morrison presents their intention very beautifully when both the sisters decide to buy marigold seeds from that money which they saved to purchase a bicycle because they believed that the marigold flowers will bloom and ensure the safe arrival of Pecola's baby. These seeds are the symbol of the hope for a new life in the spiritual deadness lying around. However, Pecola gives birth to a premature baby, which dies. Soon after, Cholly Breedlove dies in the warehouse. In the end, Claudia describes the painful condition of Pecola, who was used by society as a scapegoat to make themselves feel more proud, happy, and beautiful.

"The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tyre rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milk weed, among all the waste and beauty of the world -which is what she has self was. All of our waste which we use dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us."

(The Bluest Eye)

Pecola's insane condition in the end is the only way to escape the world where she cannot be beautiful and happy according to the social standards. Her search for her acceptance in the community, for her own self, is the central theme of the novel.

'Sula': A Story of A Female Carving Her Sexuality And Identity Beyond Social Expectations:

Tony Morrison's next novel '*Sula*', was published in 1973. It is the story of a Black girl named Sula who does not follow the community guidelines and traditions. Sula can be called a modern girl for she is different from other Black women who follow the code of conduct set for them by society. The novel presents the close relationship between two girls Sula and Nel who both live different lives. The novel is set in an unusual town called Bottom, where both Sula and Nel live with their families. Sula grows up in a matriarchal family where social traditions are not given much importance. She lives with her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva Peace. Nel, on the other hand, belongs to a typical traditional and so-called 'settled' household, run by the customs of the Black community. If there is anything common between them, it is that they do

not have any father figure in their life. However, when these two poles meet each other, they instantly become friends, for they both feel an urge for freedom in their hearts.

“Each had discovered years before, that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about cheating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead, Nel’s because he wasn’t) they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for.”

(Sula, 52)

Sula’s mother and grandmother are unconventional and generally people don’t have good Nations about the family. Eva Peace is a determined and dominating woman who exercises complete control over the family. Although most of the people of the Black community do not like their rebellion to social norms, Eva Peace still has an important place in society. The mother of Nel does not like the freedom loving character of Sula but this very nature becomes the basis of friendship between Sula and Nel. In fact, both of them see the existence of their freedom in each other’s friendship.

“Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut. ‘Me,’ she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, ‘I want...I want to be...wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful.’”

(Sula)

One day while playing with a neighborhood child Chicken Little they accidentally become the reason of his death by drowning in a river. However, due to fear they do not tell anyone that they had a hand in the accident. However, Sula was sorrowful after this and she feels that they had been seen by Shadrack who was a shattered soldier, returned from World War First and who lives in a sack by the river’s edge. When Sula goes to his sack to confirm this, she gets scared after seeing Shadrack and runs away. One day Sula’s mother Hannah’s dress catches fire while she was lighting fire outside her house. When Eva saw this from the window, she jumps over her to save her in which both of them get seriously injured. Hannah dies in the way to hospital. When she was burning Sula was watching her silently but did not move from her place.

Sula sees all this but does nothing. People think that she was scared, while Grandmother Eva thinks that Sula kept watching her mother burning out of curiosity. As Sula and Nel grow up, their lifestyle also changes. One day Nel decides to marry Jude like a conventional girl, who seems very strange to Sula as they promised to share everything and Sula disappears from Bottom for ten years. When Sula returns to Bottom after ten years, her social acceptance has reduced even more because people think that Sula has had affairs with many white men, and that is why she did not marry traditionally. Sula does not change her life style as a freedom loving character even after coming to Bottom. She expresses her sexuality openly as she has relations with many people, the most important of which is Nel's husband Jude, Nel is unable to tolerate this. Since "Sula grows up with a definition of sex as non-competitive", she gives not much importance to her relations with Jude. On asking by Nel she says that it was her way to test his loyalty towards Nel. However, Nel has a different opinion about all this, and she rejects her open expression of repressed sexuality. This reaction of her close friend makes Sula alone and further away from society. Her search for a perfect relationship and self identity becomes a lifelong quest. When she dies, she dies more alone and there was no one to mourn over her death except the shattered soldier Shadrock who feels sad on her death. Nel decides not to remarry again in life and become an overbearing mother for her children. When she goes to meet Eva Peace, the grandmother of Sula in an elderly care home after years, she tells Nel that she was aware of the death of Little Chicken. Now, Nel remembers her childhood promise to Sula that they will share everything. She goes to the grave stone of Sula and realizes that she is crying and that those tears belong to the memories of her childhood friend Sula more than the loneliness due to her ex-husband's disloyalty.

Tony Morrison presents through the character of Sula, the difficulty women have in finding an actual relationship where they can explore their true self. In society the repression of sexuality becomes a tool for strict adherence to gender roles. It is believed that women are made to follow, not to take any initiative, that they are required to act as inferior to men, and that they don't have any right to think. Repressed sexuality is a way to trap the actual character. Sula expresses her desire to create and define the conditions within which she can know herself fully, not simply sexually, but in every endeavour that leads her to a search for the ideal relationship. Sula is a document which connects the individual problems serving as a deterrent to the

development of a self definition and she is as free to express herself sexually as the degree to which she can overcome individual hindrances.

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself. The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over’. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman”.

(*Sula*)

Tar Baby: A Modern Woman’s Journey for Self- Fulfillment:

Another novel by Toni Morrison presenting a black woman searching for her true self and identity is *Tar Baby*. It was published in 1981. About the title of the novel, Toni Morrison presents her view, as

“Tar Baby is also a name [...] that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall.

At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things.

It held together things like Moses’ little boat and the pyramids.

For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.”

(—interview with Morrison by Karin L. Badt 1995)

The novel is the story of Jadine, a Black American girl who keeps herself away from the Black values and culture. Jadine is a modern girl as she is ashamed of herself being a Black woman so she neglects the ancient cultural properties of her race. She is a beautiful model Sorborne educated and widely travelled girl. However, she has false notions in her mind about her own culture and history of the Afro-American people. Tony Morrison has presented her as “anantithesis of the black folk and community values”. The novel is about the relationship of Jadine with Son, who washes up in the Street. *Tar Baby* explores how being a woman imprisons the female characters. The novel’s male characters tend to see the women as stupid or inferior,

simply because they are women. Gideon criticizes Thérèse for her ignorance, while Valerian ignores Margaret's desire to leave the island.

Morrison has presented through Jadine the question of Identity as she constantly refuses her identity as a Black woman. In the end of the novel, she travels back to the Island to be with her relatives to seek some solace and peace in her life. When she encounters with her own culture, through the women who causes her to realize that her acceptance of the western values has deprived her of the ability to explore and realize her history and culture, she realizes that she is a Black woman who has been hitherto influenced by western rules and values. Jadine's relationship with Son is doomed to be a failure because they represent different thinking, different worlds and different ideals. Jadine imbibes the white values to such an extent that when she finds Son in her closet, she feels that being a Black man, he would rape her. When they are together in a relationship, it is like the meeting of two opposite poles. Jadine was white in her thoughts and Elite, while Son was passionate, violent and full of primitive thoughts. Jadine forces Son, a criminal turned lover and later on her husband, to abandon his identity as a Black man.

“Let her go?” asked Son, and he smiled a crooked smile. Let go the woman you had been looking for everywhere just because she was difficult? Because she had a temper, energy, ideas of her own and fought back? Let go a woman whose eyebrows were a study, whose face was enough to engage your attention all your life? Let go a woman who was not only a woman but a sound, all the music he had ever wanted to play, a world and a way of being in it? Let that go? ‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘I can’t.’”

(*Tar Baby*)

When spring arrives, Jadine and Son visit his hometown of Eloë, Florida. The trip is a disaster for their relationship because Jadine hates Eloë, and Son loves it. The many differences between Jadine and Son come to the surface, and their divisions tear them apart when they end up back in New York. They fight more and more frequently. After a particularly violent confrontation, Jadine leaves Son and New York behind. Son comes in search of Jadine to the island but she has already left for Paris. Son decides to live a life close to the native culture of African-American people, thus throwing a contrast between himself and Jadine, who is trying to keep herself away from the Black values and cultural heritage.

Conclusion:

The fiction of Tony Morrison emerged from her African-American culture and the experience is shaped by the realization as being a part of it in her childhood and youth. As a writer of the sensibilities and experiences of the Black community in America, she proudly describes the societal and historical roles that African women have in the American history and culture. Her fiction emerged from the whole universe of her mind shaped by the Afro-American culture. She is not only a writer of sensitive stories about Black women but also a realistic chronicler of the historical transformation which she witnessed. She is one of those writers who gave African-American writings a unique place in world literature.

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