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## **Bodies that Matter: Reading Disability in Toni Morrison's Works**

**Ankita Bhowmick**

Research Scholar,  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
NIT Meghalaya, Bijni Complex, Laitumkrah,  
Shillong 793003.

**&**

**Paonam Sudeep Mangang**

Professor & Head,  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
NIT Meghalaya, Bijni Complex, Laitumkrah,  
Shillong 793003.

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### **Abstract:**

The widely published author and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has explored issues of marginalisation, trauma, and identity in her works, which explore the complexity of the human condition. The representation of bodies, which act as sites of oppression and resistance, is essential to her narrative tapestry. This essay explores how disability is portrayed in Morrison's work, particularly how characters navigate their social and cultural settings. By closely examining a few books, such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz*, *Beloved* and *Sula*, this paper investigates how Morrison questions conventional ideas of ability and disability and examines the power relationships underlying normative bodies' creation. Morrison emphasises key points by emphasising the experiences of characters who struggle with impairments.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, disability, reading disability, embodiment, oppression, resistance.

### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison is well known for her extensive examination of the intricacies of human life in her literary works. Morrison explores themes of race, gender, and power through her vivid characters and evocative prose, shedding light on the complexities of societal dynamics. Her

depiction of bodies, which act as sources of both fragility and resistance, is fundamental to her narrative fabric. Bodies are not only tangible objects in Morrison's works; they are symbolic constructions with political, historical, and cultural importance. Based on a few novels, such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz*, *Beloved* and *Sula*, this study makes the case that Morrison's depiction of disability challenges accepted ideas about ability and disability by emphasising the agency and resiliency of marginalised bodies. The field of disability studies often demonstrates the radically different perspectives about disability that can bring about a change in how people think and perceive minds and bodies. Tobin Siebers argues that though disability studies are "sometimes seen from the outside as a peripheral – as yet another sub-genre in a growing list of identity studies," "disability theory has the potential to transform critical and cultural theory all over again" (3). The scholars of disability studies, rejecting the medical model of disability, which advocates for 'fixing' a body, view disability as socially constructed. Whatever does not fit into the hegemonised notion of the 'norm' is precluded from society. Disability studies are, however, critical in understanding the inter-relatedness of various forms of oppression as Lennard J. Davis identifies disability as the missing term in the race, class and gender triad. (1995) 'Oppression' is a concept often found in sociological, historical, and literary texts defined as a dominant group subjugating a minor group. The acclaimed Brazilian theorist on oppression, Paulo Friere, in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, discusses many themes of oppression that include all forms of '-isms' which are based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, religion, and disability. This paper encourages readers to critically consider how disability is formed and experienced in society by highlighting how Morrison challenges the hegemony of normative bodies through close textual analysis.

### **Reading Cultural Hegemony and Disability**

It is crucial to place the conversation within the larger context of disability studies before thoroughly analysing Morrison's writings. Disability, as a socially created concept, is closely related to ideas of privilege, power, and cultural hegemony. Specific forms of embodiment are pathologised or marginalised within dominant discourses, while others are valorised as normative. By maintaining existing power structures and perpetuating inequality, this hegemonic construction of disability pushes people with impairments to the periphery of society. Robert F. Murphy has claimed that disability is "a distortion of conventional classification and knowing"

(4). Ellen Samuels also points out, "[t]he disabled body presents a unique challenge to an identificatory system based upon classification, as its nonnormativity manifests itself through a vast diversity of form and function" (22). In the case of Toni Morrison, disability is conceptualised as a metaphor rather than an identity. Morrison challenges these prevalent narratives about disability by providing a more complex and intersectional view of embodiment and identity. Morrison urges readers to examine their preconceptions and consider how bodies are formed and valued in society by emphasising the perspectives of characters with impairments. Disability is not solely a personal ailment in Morrison's writings; it serves as a lens through which more significant social and political processes are reflected.

### **The Bluest Eye: Disrupting the Gaze**

The *Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison explores the nuances of race, gender, identity, and beauty in 1940s America. Morrison incorporates discourse on disability into the narrative of racial oppression and the damaging effects of beauty standards on young black girls. This invites readers to consider how society marginalises those who do not fit into predetermined norms of normalcy. Morrison encourages readers to consider race, gender, and disability critically by using characters like Pecola Breedlove. This helps readers see how ableism permeates society and shapes people's experiences. The protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is a little black girl named Pecola Breedlove, who yearns for blue eyes to escape the dehumanising effects of prejudice and poverty. Pecola's desire for blue eyes may be seen as an example of dysmorphia, a disability in which people believe that their appearance makes them inferior or imperfect. Pecola's conviction that having blue eyes will make her accepted and validated shows the systemicized ableism that permeates society, owing to which some physical characteristics are valued more highly than others.

Morrison does an excellent job of capturing Pecola's experiences with abuse and neglect, which add to her sense of internal brokenness and alienation from her own body. The novel's examination of Pecola's mental state and her eventual spiral into insanity offers a striking critique of the ableist beliefs that stigmatise people who struggle with mental illness. Pecola is rendered invisible and silent by society's expectations of beauty and sanity, underscoring how racism and poverty, as well as other types of oppression, are exacerbated by disability. Morrison also asks readers to consider how beauty standards are created and how they contribute to

upholding ableist beliefs. Readers are made aware of the effects of cultural expectations and how they affect people's opinions of their worth through the character of Pecola. Pecola's unrelenting pursuit of blue eyes reinforces the idea that disability is not just a physical affliction but also a social construct with origins in power dynamics and structural inequities. It does this by serving as a metaphor for the unachievable search for perfection forced upon marginalised bodies. The *Bluest Eye* also highlights how gender, race, and disability are intertwined, especially for black women whose bodies have historically been objectified and dehumanised. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes may be interpreted as an expression of her wish to overcome social constraints and regain control of her identity and body. However, in the end, her failure to meet this idealised beauty standard brings about her insanity, underscoring the terrible effects of internalised ableism and the silence of marginalised voices.

Morrison challenges readers to consider how cultural standards and expectations impact people's experiences with marginalisation and disability through the persona of Pecola Breedlove. Morrison pushes us to critically analyse our prejudices and presumptions about who is considered deserving and valuable in society by emphasising Pecola's story. *The Bluest Eye* is a moving reminder that although bodies are essential, they should not be used in ways dictated by oppressive power structures. We can only start to envision a more inclusive and equitable world for everybody if we acknowledge and confront these systems.

### **Milkman's Dyslexia: A Case Study in Marginalization**

In the context of African American society in the middle of the 20th century, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* deftly combines themes of identity, heritage, and the pursuit of self-discovery. The dyslexic character Milkman Dead is at the centre of the novel's identity exploration; his dyslexia provides an interesting case study on the relationship between marginalisation and disability. The journey of Milkman Dead, a young man searching for self-awareness and a connection to his ancestry, is central to the novel's plot. The main theme of Milkman's story is his battle with dyslexia, which affects how he interacts with words and perceives himself. This article explores Milkman's dyslexic experiences and examines how Morrison questions conventional ideas about aptitude and disability. A significant theme of Milkman Dead's persona in *Song of Solomon* is his battle with dyslexia. Milkman struggles with reading and writing from a young age, feeling inadequate and alienated in a society that places

great importance on literacy. Morrison sensitively depicts Milkman's dyslexia, emphasising the humiliation and anguish he feels from not being able to perform academically on par with his contemporaries. Dyslexia causes Milkman to feel insecure and self-conscious, which heightens his sense of inadequacy and distances him from the African American community at large as well as his family. Morrison's depiction of Milkman's dyslexia is a moving indictment of how social structures and conventions support the marginalisation of people with disabilities. Individuals who face difficulties with reading and writing are frequently marginalised and denied access to educational and career opportunities in a society that views literacy as a sign of intelligence and value. The intersections between Milkman's dyslexia and his racial and class experiences make it more difficult for him to get the help and resources he needs to deal with his impairment.

### **Violet's Illiteracy and Its Significance**

Set against the backdrop of 1920s Harlem, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* deftly examines the nuances of the human experience, exploring themes of pain, love, and identity. Representing bodies as locations of memory, desire, and cultural resistance is fundamental to the novel's plot. This article analyses Morrison's subtle portrayal of reading impairment in *Jazz*, concentrating on Violet's battle with illiteracy. It becomes clear that Violet Trace's illiteracy helps examine agency, identity, and social marginalisation issues. Morrison sensitively depicts Violet's illiteracy, highlighting its significant influence on her sense of self and connections with the outside world. Morrison questions conventional ideas of ability and disability through Violet's experiences. Due to her low-income upbringing and lack of access to schooling, Violet's incapacity to read and write begins to define who she is. Morrison presents Violet's illiteracy as a cause of humiliation, annoyance, and loneliness rather than as merely not being literate. Violet struggles with thoughts of inadequacy and unworthiness throughout the book, thinking she is beneath others who can communicate through written language.

Nevertheless, Violet shows incredible tenacity and agency throughout the novel despite the difficulties brought on by her illiteracy. She finds other ways to express her identity and presence in the world rather than letting her lack of literacy skills define her. Violet connects with people and carves out a place for herself in the community by navigating life's difficulties in Harlem with creativity, ingenuity, and emotional intelligence. Morrison delivers a powerful

indictment of how social systems and conventions support the marginalisation of people with disabilities through her depiction of Violet's illiteracy. Morrison invites readers to examine their preconceived notions about ability and disability by emphasising Violet's experiences throughout the novel. This allows readers to see every person's compassion and intrinsic worth, regardless of apparent limitations. In addition, Violet's lack of literacy provides a lens through which larger societal power and privilege structures are examined. In a society where racial, class and gender disparities affect access to education and literacy, Violet's lack of literacy serves as a symbol of the structural injustices that permeate American culture. Morrison urges readers to think about the ways marginalisation—which already affects people like Violet because of their colour and socioeconomic status—intersects with illiteracy to exacerbate the difficulties they confront.

### **Unveiling the Intersections of Trauma and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

A masterpiece of American literature, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* captivates readers with its eerie examination of memory, trauma, and the lasting effects of slavery. The narrative of Sethe, a former slave who is plagued by the spirit of her dead daughter, and her battle to accept her past are at the centre of the book. The representation of real and spectral bodies as locations of extreme anguish and resiliency is fundamental to Morrison's story.

In this article, we also delve into Morrison's depiction of reading disability in *Beloved*, focusing on the character of Denver and her fraught relationship with literacy. We examine how Morrison questions conventional ideas of ability and disability by examining Denver's experiences within the larger framework of the novel. We contend that Morrison's depiction of disability offers a sophisticated examination of the intersections of race, trauma, and embodiment and a potent critique of cultural hegemony, drawing on concepts from disability studies and critical race theory.

The character Denver is an engaging case study on the relationship between trauma, marginalisation, and disability. Denver's dyslexic journey stands out among the many levels of intricacy in Morrison's story as a moving illustration of how reading disabilities can compound the difficulties experienced by people who are already burdened by the history of slavery and systemic injustice. Morrison challenges readers to consider how societal structures and norms, particularly in the context of racist experiences in America, contribute to the marginalisation of

people with disabilities through Denver's journey. Denver is portrayed as a reclusive and socially isolated young child growing up in the aftermath of slavery, finding comfort in the company of her mother and the haunting presence of her murdered sister, known only as Beloved. Although Denver's dyslexia is not identified as such in the text, Morrison leaves hints that allude to her difficulties with writing and reading. Denver, for instance, may find it difficult to understand written language, which contributes to her uneasiness in social situations and her unwillingness to interact with the outside world.

Morrison's depiction of Denver's dyslexia offers a microcosm of the more significant difficulties that people with reading disabilities have in society. Those with difficulty reading and writing are marginalised and prevented from fully participating in social, economic, and educational possibilities in a society where literacy is frequently associated with intelligence and merit. Denver's racial and social background exacerbates her dyslexia, making it more difficult for her to get the help and resources she needs to deal with her condition. Denver's dyslexia interacts with her traumatic experiences and family background throughout the book, exacerbating her feelings of alienation and loneliness. Denver struggles with feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a child, believing herself to be undeserving of affection and belonging because of her mother's horrific history. Her dyslexia exacerbates her sense of otherness in a world that frequently ignores or is unable to meet her needs, acting as yet another obstacle to understanding and relationships. Despite all of the hardships, Denver exhibits tremendous perseverance and agency despite her dyslexia. She uses her creativity, intuition, and emotional intelligence to connect with people, finding alternate ways to navigate the world rather than letting her impairment define her. Denver meets Beloved, a kindred spirit who understands her loneliness and yearning for connection. They can interact on a more visceral and profound level despite linguistic barriers.

Morrison's depiction of Denver's dyslexia provides a potent critique of the ways in which social structures and conventions support the marginalisation of people with disabilities, especially in light of racist experiences in the United States. Morrison invites readers to reevaluate their preconceptions about ability and disability by emphasising Denver's experiences throughout the story. This allows readers to see every person's humanity and intrinsic worth, regardless of perceived limitations. In doing so, "Beloved" becomes a monument to the human



spirit's tenacity and the ability of empathy and understanding to transcend obstacles of marginalisation and oppression.

### **Embodied Narratives in Toni Morrison's Sula**

The rich tapestry of themes in Toni Morrison's *Sula* includes everything from race and gender to betrayal and friendship. However, its insightful examination of disability frequently gets lost in the spotlight. In *Sula*, disability is more than just a physical ailment; it permeates every aspect of the lives of the protagonists, profoundly influencing their identities and interpersonal connections. Morrison challenges readers to explore the complexity of disability and its linkages with power, community, and selfhood by closely investigating the disabled bodies in the book. The mysterious bond between *Sula*'s protagonist, Sula Peace, and her childhood friend, Nel Wright, is at the story's centre. Although neither Sula nor Nel identifies as impaired, a disability lens can be used to understand their experiences. Sula represents a cognitive and emotional impairment that defies the expectations placed on women, especially black women, in their culture. She does this by being nonconformist and defying social conventions. While navigating the restrictions of her gender and race, Nel, on the other hand, struggles with the limitations imposed by cultural conventions and expectations, feeling as though she has an internalised disability.

*Sula*'s grandmother, Eva Peace, adds complexity to the novel's disability examination. Eva, a person without limbs, is frequently presented as an example of tenacity and fortitude, subverting the stereotype that a disability is a sign of weakness or inadequacy. Morrison challenges preconceived notions about disability through Eva's persona, urging readers to reevaluate their views while emphasising the agency and autonomy that people with disabilities can have. Additionally, *Sula* explores the ways in which oppressive systems, particularly those about race and gender, connect with disabilities. The Bottom, a primarily black neighbourhood, struggles with marginalisation, poverty, and a lack of options, which makes it harder for those with disabilities to live there. Morrison's story highlights the inequalities and exclusions experienced by disabled people from mainstream society while also highlighting their tenacity and inventiveness in overcoming these challenges.

Sula celebrates the richness and complexity of the human experience, making readers rethink disability as a dynamic and multidimensional component of identity that profoundly intersects with gender, class, and race rather than as a static condition. Sula challenges readers to work towards a more just and equitable world where all people, regardless of ability, are valued and respected by emphasising the experiences of disabled characters and providing a more inclusive view of humanity.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Toni Morrison provides deep insights into the complex interactions between embodiment, identity, and societal power dynamics through her literary works' examination of reading disabilities. Morrison questions conventional ideas of ability and disability by thoughtfully illustrating people who struggle with reading impairments like dyslexia and illiteracy. This encourages readers to reevaluate the role that bodies play in society. Morrison emphasises the experiences of those whose bodies differ from normative expectations in novels like *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Jazz*. This highlights the ways in which structural inequities intersect with individual embodiment to produce lived realities.

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