Toni Morrison: Strong Voice for African-Americans

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Toni Morrison, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, has been hailed as one of the greatest American authors of the 20th century. Her works explore and portray blacks’ destiny, history, and spiritual world, emphasizing on gender, race, and culture. *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, the two novels the thesis has selected to make analysis are crucial to her writing career. Toni Morrison’s great many literary works anatomize the survival and psychological pain of African Americans under the restrain and repression of mainstream culture, trying to find out a solution.

*Keywords:* Toni Morrison, African-American writing, *Song of Solomon, Beloved*

**Introduction**

With the continuous increase of the introduction and review of multiculturalism and minority discourse, African-American literature has gained unprecedented attention in recent years in the domestic literary criticism. It seems that even deeper explorations have been focused on most of the black woman writers, and among them Toni Morrison (1931-2019) attracts the greatest attention due to her many marvelous novels and her widespread influence. Her works have been added to the syllabus of senior high school in the whole nation, and have become part of the American lives.

Being the first black woman writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the American history, not only Toni Morrison herself is regarded as one of the most outstanding black writers in American literature, her already very visible fictions are thought to be part of mainline American fiction that should take its rightful place in the canon. Morrison’s writings are firmly established in her own black folk roots and the community in which she grew up. Her novels have always been expressing and exploring the black history, destiny, and spiritual world, giving prominence to gender, race, and culture. She has surely aroused inspirations and caught certain attention in both internal and external academic circles.

**Comprehension of Toni Morrison’s Narratives**

The questions raised in a struggle over the relation of race, reading, and critical theory share similar worries in some respects with that of feminist theory: Who can represent the blacks’ voices? Are the readers of black literature confined only to blacks? What can be the measure of judgments in reading black literature: Are the tools of contemporary criticism adequate or a more basic, moral, and ideological obligation need to be demanded for? Some black theorists call for the most sophisticated critical theories and methods available to reappropriate and redefine their own black discourses. They believe it necessary to analyze the ways of
writing as far as race is concerned, to study how attitudes toward racial differences create and structure literary texts, and to determine how critical methods can successfully reveal the traces of ethnic differences in literature.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari coin the term minor literature in their discussion of Kafka's writing to signify “that which a minority constructs out of a major language”. They explicitly designate that it is “the glory” of minor literature “to be the revolutionary force for all literature”. They denote the conditions of all revolutionary literature out of all its prominent features: “the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.18). Deleuze and Guattari’s statements can be used to examine the works of Toni Morrison, who sets up her African American literary worlds out of the major language of English.

What seems more tragic to Morrison than the literal absence of black people in western literature was the fact that she found most books she read by black novelists (mostly men: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin) assumed the white as their audience, explaining things about black culture that the black were so familiar with. Morrison longs for the black American artist to make a closer identification of her community—“there must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it” (Morrison, 1984, p.339 ). In the plainest, simplest terms, Toni Morrison wanted to write a book about black people, in the language of black people, to speak to and for the black people.

Despite the criteria from the canon, Toni Morrison, from her point of view, demands her readers to meet her books on their own terms—she wants them to understand her standards, her goals. What are her goals? Her goal is to write a distinctive African-American version of the novel. She determines to create the kind “Afrocentric” novels, in contrast to the novels by earlier black writers (especially men) that were essentially considered “Eurocentric” about black people. What would this African-Americanized novel be like? Morrison lists 11 characteristics that she feels should define African-American writing:

1. A participatory quality between book and reader. She wants you “in” the story, not on the outside looking in.
2. An aural quality in the writing—writing like spoken world instead of written words.
3. An open-endedness in the endings of her books that is agitating—no tidy little endings that tie everything into a neat package.
4. An acceptance of and ability to detect differences—do not homogenize everything.
5. Acknowledgment of a broader cosmology and system of logic—one that includes magic and mystery and listens to the body when it speaks.
6. A functional as well as an aesthetic quality. For example, a jazz funeral march is functional: It is not just music; it honors the dead and connects the living to their ancestors.
7. An obligation to bear witness.
8. Service as a conduit for the ancestor.
9. Uses of humor that are frequently ironic.
10. An achieved clarity or epiphany and a tendency to be prophetic.
11. A novel that would take her people through the pain and denial of their racially haunted history to healing zone. (From Toni Morrison Explained: A Reader’s Map to the Novel by Ron David, 2000).

Since it is impossible for African Americans to escape the pain of the wound in their soul, Morrison’s creative writing strives to help her society regain belief in itself and clear up the complexes of the years of
denigration and self-denial. Her fictions self-consciously keep connection with sociopolitical struggle that has historically characterized African American experience.

**Toni Morrison’s Significant Endeavors**

Morrison began her own literary career in 1970, when *The Bluest Eye* was published. Her second novel, *Sula* (1974), won the National Book Critics Award and the critics lauded Morrison for her profound portrayal of the African-American lifestyle as well as her splendid narrative voice. With her next offering, *Song of Solomon* (1977), generally considered as a book of men, Morrison gained an international attention. Morrison switched her perspective to that of an African-American man, named Milkman Dead, who journeys south from his hometown in Ohio to recover a lost treasure in his family’s past but finds his family history instead. Morrison makes *Song of Solomon* not only a story of individual self-discovery but also a tribute to the richness of the black cultural heritage. The fiction was the main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the first novel by a black writer to be chosen since Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940. In 1988 Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *Beloved* (1987), a story deals with slavery and infanticide. In her works Morrison explored the black experience in a racist culture. The novel *Beloved* won international acclaim and everlastingly established Morrison in the upper echelon of 20th-century authors. She was the first African-American, and only the eighth woman, to win the Nobel Prize, considered the highest honor in the field. Morrison received another prestigious award, the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1996, and in the same year, her enduring popularity became evident when *Song of Solomon* resurfaced on bestseller lists.

With her seven extraordinary novels and several volumes, Toni Morrison witnessed her unshakable position to open a new page of the twenty-century African-American literature. With the unceasing effort of generations of black writers, the relationship between Anglo-American and African-American culture has been put into reconsideration. Among these writers who keep a sober vision to the African-American history and presence Toni Morrison is considered the most outstanding one. She is deeply concerned about the spiritual world of black women and the newly appearing problems of black men as well; she puts even more stress on the influence of the white Americanism imposed upon blacks. Her works explore and portray blacks’ destiny, history, and spiritual world, emphasizing on gender, race, and culture.

At present days although slavery has been abolished over a hundred years, racialism and segregation still haunt the African Americans even the entire American society. Toni Morrison’s great many literary works anatomize the survival and psychological pain of African Americans under the restrain and repression of mainstream culture, trying to find out a solution. *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, the two novels the thesis has selected to make analysis, are crucial to her writing career. Ron David gives high praise to these two novels; meanwhile, he also points out that among all the characteristics Morrison considers the African-American writing should possess; she does not actualize the one that she has dreamed for—African American novels would take her people through the pain and denial of the past to a healing zone. Then why cannot the writer fulfill her pursued goals?

The study of American and African-American culture and literature establishes sufficient theoretical and factual support for probing into Morrison’s novels. Firstly, African-American literature generated and developed under the influence of American mainstream culture did not in history genuinely reflect aspirations of the slaves. Secondly, African-American literature, which had always been marginalized, strived to dispose
the pain and struggle of African Americans by dint of two black renaissances in history. Black writers, at the same time, were demanded to portray “The New Negro” with independent personality and disobedient spirits, entirely different from the faithful and obedient image of “Uncle Tom”. Moreover, with the development of the Black Womanist movement, Toni Morrison and many other black women writers pointed out that African-American literature in general failed to fully and truly reflect the panorama of the black culture and nationalism due to its centuries’ rejection of women’s literature. In addition, an elaboration of Morrison’s proposition of what makes a distinctive African-Americanized novel, together with a survey of her remarkable achievements in the American literary world in the past two decades, reflects her theoretical thinking and writing process.

Published in 1977, the central storyline of *Song of Solomon* is a quest for black identity; and *Beloved*, whose publication was in 1987, is a story deals with slavery and infanticide. Arranging the two novels in the order of time as far as the contents are concerned, the thesis tries to grasp the psychological struggle of several black generations in the past one hundred years. These two novels not only manifest the subjects that the writer keeps sticking to about the confusion, brutality, and love in African Americans lives, but also express her consideration of the literature and culture of her own race at psychological layer. Furthermore, since black women are often put into a dilemma of being obliged to play different roles in the society, the fact that how Morrison, the representative of the Black Women’s Literature, would depict the status and role of black women in the black community is especially conspicuous. Besides, Morrison also suggests the approaches of casting off the bondage of slavery and driving the shadow out of the hearts of blacks.

By depicting a couple of representative instances, Morrison discloses that mainstream culture takes name, image, and language these crucial factors in blacks lives as manipulative instruments to impose oppression on them, acutely pointing out spiritual destroy and ideological infiltration can do much more fatal damage to African Americans than what a physical injury can do to them. Since original names are links to connect African Americans with their families and their tribes, the destruction of African-American values is closely associated with the loss of original African names. Besides naming, a mirror can be an extremely controlling tool when a person is not sufficiently self-possessed. Mirrors can be employed to create the icons for the sake of their own benefit of whites imposing on black women the dangerous and destructive influence of the white values. Apart from mirrors, language is another component that Morrison tries to reconstruct. Those who are in power only reveal what they can articulate, so language under manipulative circumstance only conduces to the social order maintained by the oppressors. In great details—misnaming and renaming; recognition of self-image; control and re-control of language, Morrison not only disposes the misery blacks suffered from being despised, insulted and downtrodden, but also reflects African Americans’ persistent resistance against these oppressions. Besides, since Morrison has always put stress on the relationship between individual and community, her idea that what effect the black community can have on individuals is an important part in her books that cannot be neglected. Morrison points out that estrangement from the community inevitably means a lack of communal support and understanding, which is harmful to the healthy formation of individual identity.

Women characters in Morrison’s novels are the most impressive ones due to the fact that they are often the unavoidable focuses of all the conflicts, and their intricate positions make their reactions to the oppressions play an indispensable role to the entire black community. As portrayed in *Beloved*, being woman, black women slaves were often subjected to rape, enforced childbirth and natal alienation from their children. The mother would rather release her children through physical death than let the master subject them in bondage to a slow
“social death”. Although some critics consider *Song of Solomon* as a novel of black men, the spiritual center of it is still women characters. It is these women, especially Milkman’s aunt Pilate who reconstitutes his value. In her books Morrison reveals not only the double repression imposed on black women due to their race and gender but also their heroic act of resistance, manifesting the status and role of black women in the black community.

The two protagonists eventually reclaim their lost selves and achieve ultimate freedom in their respective ways. In *Beloved*, Morrison reveals that physical escape does not necessarily bring with psychological freedom. The most crucial part of healing is the unavoidable confrontation with the original trauma and feeling the pain again. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison urges the middle-class not to bleach his Negro soul in the overwhelming white Americanism. Guided to turn toward the past by Aunt Pilate, Milkman’s trip south finally leads him to an understanding of himself, his family, and his culture.

Both novels are closed with optimistic endings: Milkman fulfills the past legacy and his “soar” by the last leap from the cliff; and Sethe eventually exorcises the ghost of the past and expects a more promising tomorrow. Then does it mean that Morrison’s novels can actually take her people through the denial and pain of the past to a healing zone? Milkman’s final “soar” is such a costly flight that requires so many women’s contributions and sacrifices. Since women do not stay of their own accord, who will come to help these tormented women “soar” like what they have done to help men do? Besides, since Shalimar, an isolated place where removes Milkman’s materialistic desire and draws him closer to the past and his root, is merely written out of Morrison’s imagination, it is still left unsolved the question how to make the contemporary black community walk out of the shadow of the influence and impact of mainstream Americanism. Even Morrison herself cannot completely cast off the obsession of the imposition from the dominant culture. Apart from the societal complexity of blacks in racial issues, the rooted racialism in whites is another factor that makes it difficult to decide any simple solution to take black people through the denial and pain of the past to a healing zone.

In these two novels as depicted by Morrison, black women are generally the sufferers of oppressions, strivers of survival, and transmitters of culture. Morrison takes Pilate and Baby Suggs as the representatives of the black women who strive to transmit love and black culture. They are surely the souls of the black community. However, Morrison does not bestow the omnipotent ability on them because she knows there is no such a simple answer to so complicated a question of human beings. This also reflects Morrison’s courage of exploration.

**Conclusion**

In sum, in her works Morrison emphasizes two relationships that are substantial for the African Americans to heal the trauma and reconstruct the meaning of blackness: (1) past and present/forgetting and remembering: Past is the key to open the present doors. The prescription to heal the traumatic injury is remembering rather than forgetting; (2) individual and community: Individual survival should take communal redemption as a foundation and premise.

As a woman of the black community and a representative of the Black Women’s Literature, Morrison strongly advocates that African-American literature should be a distinctive African American version of the novel. She herself does not fulfill all her pursued goals. In addition to the black women’s issue remains unsolved, the involute intention in blacks and the rooted racialism in whites make Morrison’s proposition still endure prolonged trial. Moreover, her writing is also repressed and influenced by the mainstream culture, which
makes her works unavoidably have their objective limitations. What makes Morrison admirable is her courage to question the system that conduces to her success, and her spirits of taking writing as her mode of thinking and way of exploring are also respectable. Being a persistent researcher with sincerity, Morrison and the entire black community are required to endure a prolonged endeavor and struggle.

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