

# Portrayal of Race and Gender in the Selected Novels of Toni Morrison: A Critical Reading

Sunita Sinha

Head Department of English, Women's College Samastipur, L N M Mithila University, Darbhanga

"I was always interested in the consequences of racism ..... In the self-loathing, that is involved in it. A self-loathing that is frequently lethal. But, before we as a society can get through racism, we need to understand it, so, I decided to look at it through the eyes of an innocent figure, which I thought was a female child."

-Toni Morrison

Racism and Sexism appear to be integral to our society, and examining the plausible impacts of race and gender discrimination is a matter of immense significance. One of the busiest terms in academia today, race and gender come most naturally to African American women writers as Black Women have been subjected to double oppression. Firstly, they are discriminated against based on their ethnicity and secondly, because they are the so-called "second sex". Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) quotes Stoller thus: "Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotation. If the proper terms for sex are male and female, the corresponding terms for gender are masculine and feminine; this latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex."<sup>1</sup> "The purpose of making this distinction has been to free women (inevitably men too) from sexist stereotyping based on limiting conceptions of their 'nature'; and the upshot has been discrediting of essentialist theories of human behavior which designates certain characteristics as male-specific and others as female-specific."<sup>2</sup> The concept of 'sexism', is very deeply embedded in language and literature. Criticizing the androcentric dominance in literary and linguistic power, Gilbert and Gubar write: "In patriarchal Western culture the text's author is a father, a protagonist, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his...."<sup>3</sup> Further, Racism has been defined by Hernton Calvin as: "all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group; whose physical characteristics are dissimilar to the former group behaviour and emotions that compel one group to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone, as if, it did not belong to the human race."<sup>4</sup>

A consistent preoccupation with the themes of race, gender, and sexuality is discernible in the work of writers like Jean Rhys, Nadine Gordimer, and Toni Morrison who make masterful employment of narrative power to bring a transformation in society. The significance of race and gender in the works of Black writers is natural and Toni Morrison is not exempt from it either. Like these writers, Toni Morrison focuses on the reconstruction of feminine racial individuality. As the African Americans were subjected to the most severe kind of oppression therefore their most powerful works were those which chronicled their fiercest and most traumatic experiences.

This paper examines through Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*, the issues of race and gender and probes into the African Americans' psyche that envision a discrimination-free society charged

with the grandeur of equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice, where African Americans will be able to escape from inferiority complex and begin anew with restored vigour.

Toni Morrison examines the racial question very meticulously in her stories. Her novels question morality, fairness, the equality which are still unobtainable by numberless people who are outraged by the concepts of race and gender. Morrison's novels emphasize the racial issues faced by the Blacks and led to the emergence of a new type of literature which is an amalgamation of both cultures and is rightly called African American literature. Toni Morrison's novel is an awakening call to all the discriminated people who unite and crave for female unanimity to gain empowerment. In this manner, they can stand together and resist any kind of despotism, enslavement, and subjugation. Morrison assesses society from the humanist as well as the feminist point of view. Morrison's message in her narratives is to eliminate all kinds of savageness, victimizations, uncertainties, and harshness. The issues of oppression, humiliation, inequality, and barbarity have all to be erased from their life.

The need of the hour is to bring forth an internal transformation. Toni Morrison envisions a society constructed on the substructure of an emancipated and unbiased community. Morrison powerfully depicts the reasons behind the large-scale totalitarianism and describes the power of racism. In Morrison's novels, marginalization is a major issue. Marginalization is a universal issue that has been visible in all societies around the world. Marginalized groups often bear complicated options in comprehending and showcasing their distinctiveness. They may choose to include the designs and motifs of the dominating White group, thus rejecting various moralities, continuing to evaluate them by the standards of the leading community, and weakening the bond of unity that had lent them acceptance earlier. Although the impact of White racism on Black communities is enormous, Morrison concentrates on the question of the position of women within the Black communities, and how their relationship with both men and other women assists them in reconsidering their fortunes.

Toni Morrison's affinity for the Black community and the persistence and determination of its unique culture can be seen throughout her works. She makes frequent use of the themes of devaluation and separation of Blacks in the White society and expresses her anxiety as a Black woman in a world that did not recognize the individuality of the Black woman. Morrison's novels are replete with notions of women's empowerment and her women protagonists bravely challenge the prevalent norms of gender, race, and class.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, reveals how racism, which is prevalent within the African American community, can be visualized as an outcome of the suppression. The racism, oppression, and denigration have fragmented the character's identity and sense of prestige. Almost all African-Americans depicted in the novel loathe their blackness. The agonizing impact of racism on Black girls is distinctly visible in Morrison's fiction. As Shelby Steel puts it "to be Black was to be a victim, therefore not a victim was not to be a Black."<sup>5</sup> The cultural standards based on skin tone and facial features are depicted in this novel as the chief device of racial discrimination. The novel unravels the distressing consequences of domineering White, middle-class American standards of beauty on the evolving female identity of a young African American girl in the early 1940s.

The accepted standard of beauty defined by the White standards has a shattering impact on Pecola. There are many instances in the novel that point toward the deep-rooted prejudice of the Whites against Black Americans. Pecola's menstruation makes Claudia and Frieda place Pecola away and hide the matter from her mother, but we can perceive the questioning and knowing look in the eyes of Rosemary, the woman living next door who instantly discloses the fact to Mrs. MacTeer that, "Frieda and Claudia are out here

playing nasty!"<sup>6</sup>. We can also see that Pecola could very well feel the discriminating look in the White shopkeeper's eyes when she visits his shop to buy some candy. She could see the White gaze piercing through her persona. She could feel it "lurking in the eyes of all White people, "<sup>7</sup> making her feel undesirable.

Written in 1973, Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula* presents the terrible life of Black people after the First World War and their contest with White society. *Sula*, effectively highlights how African American communities both value and detest those characters who have shattered the barriers of the community and have been reduced to a marginalized position. The contrasting story of traditional Nel and sexually emancipated Sula offers a remarkable fusion of feminism and nationalism.

The novel chronicles the story of the friendship of two women protagonists, Nel and Sula. Both share many things in common. Both are Black, both are smart, both are poor, and have the same upbringing in the town, of Ohio. Sula is considered to be a danger to their society, and to her close friend, Nel throughout their childhood, to womanhood. Morrison's *Sula* is a saga of a deep bond of friendship between two girls, who, from their girlhood days, share the same desires, dark secrets, judgments, and crime. The novel remains a tour-de-force of narrative art extolling the themes of race, religion, and gender. Morrison's probing of Black characters and her new perspectives as they emerge from her fiction beautifully modify the standard views about American literature.

Centered on the strong identity of the Black woman, the novel has as its heroine, the powerful empowered Sula who challenges the boundaries of race and gender. Her search for identity is her lifelong struggle, which she combats valiantly. K. Sumana makes a relevant comment: "Sula opens up new literally and critical options not only for the study of the text by African-American women but for African-American literary study more generally. The novel certainly helps to set a new agenda for Black women's social and narrative possibilities."<sup>8</sup>

In *Sula*, Morrison talks about the difficulties that African Americans still have to face when they try to culturally mingle and blend into American communities. In the novel, it is depicted that equal opportunities were not granted to African Americans. The novelist assesses the close relationship between Nel and Sula. Sula and Nel, observe that their state of affairs in the American community is complex and complicated because they are first of all women and secondly, they are Black too. Race and Gender, therefore, still cast their evil eye on Society in America. Both protagonists supplement each other and battle against racism in cooperation.

At the beginning of the novel, we see that the African American soldiers come back home from Europe after the First World War I, they do not get as much respect for their service as the White soldiers. After they come back from War, they start working for their civil rights. We are introduced to one of the residents of the Bottom, named Shadrack who is shown as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder arising out of the barbarous events he witnessed in the War. Shadrack's first experience had been in France, in the year, 1917. While confronting bullets and other artillery, he sees the man next to him get killed. Shadrack sees the man's " head disappear... under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet."<sup>9</sup>

When Shadrack comes back to his senses, he realizes that he has lost all command over his hand and other body parts:

" Anything could be anywhere."<sup>10</sup> When he gets out of the hospital, he weeps bitterly as, " he didn't even know who or what he was... with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock... and nothing nothing nothing to do"<sup>11</sup>. Bloom rightly remarks, "Like the freed slaves in *Beloved* and the orphaned Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, Shadrack lacks a sense of self and has no clear

idea of how to live in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, from the mental hospital Shadrack is sent to Medallion. At this moment, Shadrack starts contemplating issues like fear and death. He invents a method to confront these issues and creates National Suicide Day on, January 3 of every year, “Shadrack began a struggle... to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of Controlling it...It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both... in this manner he institutes National Suicide Day.”<sup>13</sup>

The character of Shadrack projects the futility of life. The post-war, psychosis drives him to a mentally imbalanced estate. He is given the credit for creating a holiday - National Suicide Day. Although he seems to be a pretty cheerful character apparently, the underlying feel of disintegration and persisting murkiness and despondency is discernible. However, a great number of The Bottom people die while celebrating his National Suicide Day. It is their narrow-mindedness that is responsible for this.

Through Shadrack, Morrison relates how racial biases destroy a man’s mental quiet and sanity. Life in the Bottom was painful and depressing. The story takes us to 1920. We are introduced to Nel's parents: “Wiley Wright and Helene Wright. Helene took birth in a brothel called the Sundown House to a " Creole whore who worked there.”<sup>14</sup> Helene's grandmother, Cecile, removes her from Sundown House and brings her to a house where she is constantly guarded by a statue of the Virgin Mary. Helene's grandmother tells the young Helene “to be constantly on guard for any sight of her mother's wild blood.”<sup>15</sup>

She is anxious that Helene will pursue the profession of her mother. So, when Wiley Wright, a ship's cook, falls in love with and marries Helene, both she and her grandmother are happy about her shift to Medallion to " a lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window." <sup>16</sup> Helene behaves like a stern guardian for Nel -" any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground." <sup>17</sup> Helene manages to nurture Nel into a kind, obedient girl. Helene is quite like Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. In her aspiration to have an English nose, Helene keeps telling Nel- "while you sittin, there, honey, go head and pull your nose. It hurts, Mama. Don’t you want a nice nose when you grow up?" <sup>18</sup>

When Helene’s grandmother, Cecile gets unwell, Helene and Nel visit her. While boarding the train, Helene inadvertently enters the car which was meant for the Whites only. She is brazenly and disrespectfully treated by the conductor. Helene feels humiliated yet smiles at him remorsefully. Her smiling at the man who mistreated her, makes all the soldiers sitting there look at her with disgust as she didn’t react against the discriminatory behaviour. Nel cannot tolerate the subservient demeanor of her mother. She finds her non-resistance intolerable. She takes a vow never to behave like her mother. Her abhorrence towards the Whites is caused due to the humiliating attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks. By the time they reach, Cecile is no more. However, they meet Rochelle, Nel’s grandmother. Nel becomes very glad to see her grandmother. She likes her resistance to all traditional restrictions imposed by society. After coming back to Medallion, Nel feels an evident change in her personality. She observes that she is an individual in her own right. At this juncture, a young girl Sula comes into Nel’s life. To begin with, Helene does not appreciate their togetherness. This was because of Sula’s mother, Hannah who did not have an acceptable repute. However, after some time, Helene starts accepting their growing friendship, as Sula comes across as a good person. The different atmosphere in Sula’s house is appreciated by Nel. She begins to look forward to going to Sula’s house. Though different by nature both girls complete each other - “Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality. Although both were unshaped, from less things, Nel seems stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes.”<sup>19</sup>

Similar identities get Nel and Sula very near. As Barbara Smith remarks, "the necessary bonding that has always taken place between Black women for the barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves".<sup>20</sup> Sula and Nel share many things - be it their womanhood, collaboration with the males, or the notion of sexuality. Although Nel and Sula are similar in these things, they are quite contrary in other respects. Whereas Sula is emotional and enterprising, Nel is alert and reliable. Finally, we see that in the novel Nel suffers sexual and racial discrimination. However, Sula comes forth as a self-reliant woman. Thus, Sula can be categorized as evil and Nel as good. However, both women know that being Black is a curse and the only escape lies in being freed.

In sharp contrast to the patriarchal society, Sula seems to be enjoying the relationships with men and then ousting them from her life. Known to be an evil person, Sula makes the men fear her presence.

Thus, we see that, in a story centred around the family and friendship, Sula is the story of two girls who despite being too close to each other in their earlier years, end up betraying each other as they grow older. Lot of events that happen in the novel testify to this. Sula is found sleeping with the husband of her childhood friend, Nel. This brings the end of Nel's marriage. Nel also blames her for Chicken Little's death, when Sula accidentally loses hold of Chicken Little's hand and he goes into the sea. However, towards the end, at the time of Sula's death, Nel goes to meet her because she believes that she is a very good person. However, Sula makes her question her goodness, she conveys to Nel that she need not be so proud and sure of her goodness and uprightness. After a few years, Nel comes to rethink that maybe Sula was right, and starts cherishing her friendship with Sula. Despite the fact, that it was Sula who had thrown the boy into the water Chicken Little's death was purely accidental. Sula should not have felt so seriously answerable for this, and Nel should have assisted in getting her out of this guilt.

In her novel, *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison exhibits the disastrous aftermath of slavery and its accompanying evils as these consequences present themselves through various ages of one family. The bruises of slavery don't allow anyone to sever himself from his past, despite attaining physical freedom for years. It is difficult to disconnect oneself from the past.

Sethe, the novel's protagonist cannot forget the traumas of slavery that she had to bear previously as a slave, living in Cincinnati post the Civil War years. While she was carrying her fourth child, the novel's protagonist, the young Sethe, managed to escape to Sweet Home, Kentucky. Unluckily, after being caught again by the heartless owner, Sethe tries to kill all four children. In this act, she ends up killing her two-year-old daughter, to release them and prevent them from suffering what she herself had to go through - the pain of humiliation, aggression, and brutality. The slavery of Blacks was aimed towards the extinction of their individuality. Blacks were left helplessly surviving with crushed self, individuality, and a feeling of nothingness. As Schapiro remarks, "The major characters in the novel are all working out of a deep loss to the self, a profound narcissistic wound that results from a breakdown and distortion of the earliest relations between self and other. In the case of *Beloved*, the intense desire for recognition evolves into enraged narcissistic omnipotence and terrifying, tyrannical domination."<sup>21</sup>

Appalled and scandalized by the countless unbearable bruises of slavery drove Sethe to drown herself in the dark abyss of isolation, subordination, violence, and trauma. The traumatic memories of the days of enslavement keep hurting Sethe. An unbearable awareness of a mysterious present keeps nagging her all the time. The infuriated ghost of her murdered daughter unhinges Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, highlighting the dislocation and fierceness of slavery into Sethe's liberated existence. This ghost is symbolic of the untold misery of unreported or undisclosed sufferers. She speaks aloud the story of the irreparable losses of all the survivors and their fellow ones.



Talking about *Beloved*, Philip Page remarks pertinently, that the "emphasis shifts from external factors that create fragmentation toward internal healing processes that allow for psychic integration."<sup>22</sup> Morrison's achievement in *Beloved* is to teach the way to survival and to depict a path leading to recovery and fulfillment.

*Beloved* presents many characters who suffer from the psychological repression of their pasts. The reason behind their trauma was chiefly, their enslavement and also from their relationship with Sethe. In this context, Mobley agrees and remarks that *Beloved* "exposes the unsaid of the narratives, the psychic subtexts that lie within and beneath the historical facts."<sup>23</sup>

*Beloved* probes into the mental consequences of rape and victimization very intensely. As Dr. Robin E. Field remarks, "Such is the case with Sethe, the most prominent of the novel's many sufferers, who bears the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back."<sup>24</sup> When two young White boys charged on Sethe and stole her milk, thus disabling her to feed her daughter, she broke down. "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Hold me down and took it."<sup>25</sup> For Sethe, the act of feeding her daughter was one of paramount importance, and when she was forced to lose the milk in the hands of the two boys, she seemed to lose herself in the process. "Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children, who have traveled to Baby Suggs's house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself."<sup>26</sup> However, even greater than the pain of losing her milk was the pain of losing her honor, when she was brutally raped. It was a wound that instigated her to kill her daughter as she felt that death would be kinder than rape. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs was repeatedly raped and suffers a lot. Sethe had to be fed by a nurse as her mother had no time or energy to feed her due to the excessive hard work that she did at a plantation. Even she was assaulted many times on the ship by the White crew members. Sethe's mother threw all the children into the sea. An elder slave woman told Sethe, "She threw them all away but you."<sup>27</sup> Thus, we see, that the lives of these women reveal how the White men exercised complete control over them and filled their life with misery and pain. Through her powerful writing, Morrison attempts to retrieve the history of Black women and goads these women to recover their dignity as well as their pasts.

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