

Influence of The Bible and Other Literature on The Novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Toni Morrison understood that belief and faith are significant to the sustaining energy of black folks navigating both slavery and post-slavery traumas. Spirituality was already a way of life for many Africans who were sold into slavery, but when shared with the new religion of their masters, it became a complex requisite for their endurance. To reject that spiritual world would mean an overall erasure of African-American life. Being an African-American, Toni Morrison accords a prophetic quality to literature and describes the writer as a "witness bearer". Morrison centres womanhood and blackness within her work, but these themes would not be fully expressed without spiritual context. Morrison holds that the real survival and freedom of human beings cannot be discovered during any political ideology and social propaganda. Man can achieve freedom and survival by putting human sufferings and miseries to an end and acquiring the heavenly virtues through love, passion, humanity, and mercy. Morrison's strength as a novelist depends upon her perspective on biblical connectivity as well as the quest of identity on the individual roots. Morrison's fiction and her works are very close to the Bible through the characters depicted in it. Morrison says that Bible wasn't part of her reading but it was of her life itself. Thus we can see in all her novel reflects the degrees of scriptural elements are tinted like the parables, epigraph, names, and so forth. Morrison realized the importance of integrating a belief system within her black characters' fictional experiences. Through this journal, the narrator makes the record of an abstract of the influences on Bible and other literature is incorporated by Toni Morrison in her fiction.

Keywords: *harlem renaissance, slave narratives, prophetic, witness bearer, and identity.*

Introduction

God created Man and Woman. He created them, in his own image and likeness. We need each other, for together we make God's image. Neither gender is better than the other; we are not competitors nor are we the same. We are different but both beautifully and wonderfully made to know him, to love him and to serve him. How wonderful would the day be when every soul respected the other person for being a child of God and we all worked together to build up the temple of God. When the Bible says that God creates everything and is before all things, it exalts man who comes from God and no longer a product of chance. The Bible frees people from anguish. Primitive people thought they were dependent on the caprice of their gods; even the Greeks, so proud of freedom, accepted the weight of a destiny from which no one could escape. Their aim is to

dominate nature was blocked by fear of offending these gods, their masters. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a great period of flowering in literature and the arts, influenced both by writers who came from North in the great migration and those who were immigrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. African-American writing has tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues or rap. There is a recurring interest in black people who have acquired social status through accommodating themselves to white society and by appropriating white values.

In 'literary archaeology' it is quite significant to the unique characteristics of Toni Morrison as a prophetic writer. Her deliberate critical treatment of American history within her novels is an act of imagining the unrecorded prophecies. Morrison's use of history calls her a witness

bearer, a foreteller, a judgement bringer, an advocate of cultural understanding, and a voice in the wilderness bringing her people on to a more meaningful existence. The first prophetic, literary archaeology speak to the American people about the dangers of racism, prejudice, and injustice. Beginning with the first novel, *The Bluest Eye* reflects a familiarity with the Bible. Morrison's novels are inscribed theological and political, meditations which insist on liberation, community, and love as central principles of hope and life in the world. In the *bluest eye*, the community ostracizes and destroys Pecola Breedlove's social experiences and individual identity. When Pecola is raped by her father, causing her ostracization and sparking her demise into insanity, and her destruction needs cleansing as she, literally engages in a daily washing dishes as a ritual. Ritual is symbolically meaningful in its re-creation or reflection of social values and beliefs. Claudia the narrator of the novel compares the cleansing purpose to the biblical sacrificial lamb of all humanity by Jesus Christ. Pecola becomes a sacrificial victim for all the sins of the society and the community selects her as a representative for its corruption (Watson, 2009). Toni Morrison's fictions reflect Christian allusions, symbols and images. Many of the characters are bearing biblical names, discussions of humanity's relationship to God, wrestling with consequences of sin and guilt and searching for redemption, role of the church, and religious practices in the daily life of the community. By looking at the work of Morrison, it is very clear that African American character searching for solace within the traditions of the white community like Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Instead of focusing on the current needs of the community or her family, Pauline is more interested in the promises of an afterlife and the escape from the earthly existence. She lack compassion for her family, but sees Christ as a judge of the sins of fallen humanity and feels contempt for her husband who is destructive to herself. According to Morrison, within the physical community that character should find their redemption and their salvation. Cholly, a character in *The Bluest Eye*, manifest his love for his daughter by abusing Pecola and reconnecting her to the physical world. There are examples of those characters such as Sula, Milkman Dead and Sethe Suggs and Paul D Garner, who isolate themselves from each other, instead of

coming together and sharing of their past and to move forward (Beaulieu, 2003).

In trilogy novels such as *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, Morrison not only works with slave religion and African American Christian traditions but also with both Old and New Testament. In *Beloved*, we read Morrison's historical novel of slavery and freedom through the enslavement of another people-the ancient Israelites. Healing or redemption can be achieved; the ghosts of the past can be transcended through communal solidarity. The central focus of this essay "The Female Revealer" Morrison provide such a intensely iconoclastic view of several contemporary discourses on African American spirituality and the role of that holiness in improving African American quality of life. There is the "Call" for spiritual assistance in the here-and-now throughout the narrative worlds of the trilogy, but transformations through faith experiences are only partially put forward (Jessee, 2008). In *Beloved*, Garner's plantation, *Sweet Home*, his slaves weren't beaten and they were encouraged to use their intelligence in problem solving, food was plentiful and nutritious. Garner, the Creator God figure here, told his people that 'the world was a toy, and one has to have fun with' is revealed to be more innocent. Garner never thought of the future and made no arrangement for the same, thus after his death Schoolteacher takes over the plantation. Throughout *Beloved*, the narrative voice insists that community is essential for human well-being. Salvation in 'Beloved' is possible when human beings coming together in God. Sethe's murder of her child is not the act for which she is condemned; rather it is her pride in the repercussion of the event that antagonizes the community. Initially the community fails to help Baby Suggs and Sethe, later they recognize the cohesion and comes to save themselves and others. Baby Suggs becomes a female prophetic voice like Jesus in the New Testament, (Mt&7) "I will come and heal him". Baby Suggs initiates the same kind of healing process for the many slaves that come to see her. She invites and encourages them to cherish every aspect of their physical reality-their flesh, their eyes, their skin, their back, their hands, their mouths, and their bodies because every inch of their bodies and flesh are exploited by their slave masters, and also to be grateful to their Creator who made them fully human and alive. Slavery has created feelings of self negation, self-hatred and self destruction.

Baby Suggs believes that the only means of survival for the slaves are self-love to make their fragmental souls to become truly free and whole. Jesus who taught his followers to love God and honor their parents so also Baby Suggs word's manifest the spirit of redemption and giving them true value of themselves (Watson, 2009).

Jazz is an art form that tells the story of the lives of everyday black folk, and it was born out of a rich historical time period of the Black experience in America. Jazz is different from the kind of music the newcomers are used that would start in one's head and fill one's heart like spirituals and gospel music, which provided spiritual uplifting or encouragement. In bearing witness to the impact of the music, Morrison uses personification as a means for the narrator to describe its powerful nature of music (Watson, 2009). A paradise offers a glimpse of hope. It brings a powerful message that respect for the marginalized might be the key to refuting violence and countering the monolithic values of patriarchy. In *Paradise*, Morrison hoped to examine "the love of God and love for fellow human beings." She wanted to explore why human beings, often influenced by religion, feel the need to create their own kind of "paradise" in society (R.Rhodes, 1993). Apples are an important symbol as they represent the knowledge forbidden to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. With her baked apples, Connie rewrites biblical narrative. Connie's nutritional gift of apples encourages the women of the convent to know. Each of the women who arrive at the convent has been brutalized and traumatized by her experience in the world. Connie tries to teach the women to go back into their own pain so that they can honestly confront the fear and despair that the pain has created. By acknowledging the complete narrative of their experiences, the women are able to accept the realities of their lives honestly, without the impulse to control anything that is beyond their capacity (Gillespie, *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison*, 2008). Morrison's text confirms that the state of paradise cannot be attained just after the physical death; it is accomplished when a mental resurrection has taken place.

Toni Morrison's novels discover that her texts are engaged with Christianity in a multiplicity ways. In selecting names of *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise* and biblical characters with names like Pilate and Shadrach, she pays homage to the endorsement of Christianity. During the Civil Rights movement, the oppressed people do find strength in Christianity and to encourage them to overlook their earthly

suffering and to focus on a reward hereafter. In reading *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, both novels construct an Edenic difference, which allows for an interrogation of the concept of innocence. Bible is one of the primary influences on Morrison's work. Toni Morrison's writing is one of the most important sites for examining the complex relationship that exists between fiction, literary theory, and literary influences (Burr, *Mythopoetic Syncretism In paradise and the Deconstruction of Hospitality in Love*, 2008). *Song of Solomon* focuses on a young black man in search of himself beyond his own family, fragmented past, and his community. Here we see the prophetic role of Morrison as a writer through her ability to 'warn' others. Morrison's prophetic voice is heard, when Milkman becoming a whole man just as the messengers or prophets of God. According to Morrison, prophets are those who bring good news like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Daniel, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad etc. Milkman compares like the Lost Sheep, spoken in the New Testament, Mathew 18/10, and Luke 15/1. The Lost sheep represent those who lost the knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Like the parable of the prodigal son in the Holy Bible, milkman must return back home to be complete and whole man. Morrison invokes the biblical prophetic voice of Ezekiel, to make the dry and disconnected bones of the black historical past to restore. Through Milkman's character, the black man has the testicular fortitude, the freedom to walk the Planet Earth and be finally himself. All human beings are referred as 'Children of God' who always strive to become one with God, which is indeed a lifelong process. Milkman's entire existence on this earth is to obtain the knowledge of God, and to know thy self.

In *A Mercy*, Floren's mother speaks words that her daughter will never hear, words of wisdom that one might argue, Morrison passing on to the readers. Floren's mother trusted Jacob because she saw her daughter "as a human child, not pieces of eight". Floren's mother places her faith in the human man, who responds to her with pity and understanding. As a result, Floren's mother claims, taking her daughter is "*not a miracle, Bestowed by God, but it is mercy offered by a human*". At the end of the novel, Morrison makes it clear that as long as society predicates itself upon greed, entitlement, privilege, racism, and sexism, salvation will remain impossible for all (Stave, 2013, pp. 126-139). The Biblical story of Cain and Abel is

applied to the novels of Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*. It suggests a connection between memory, community, and Individual identity. Cain's complete refusal to remember and to mourn compares with Sethe's acts out of pure desperation, and *Sula* who kills accidentally. Cain denies his responsibility both for his brother and for his act: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4/9), and he seeks to protect himself: "Lord, my punishment is greater than I can bear" (Genesis 4/13). Cain is concerned with self and refuses to acknowledge his effect on the "other", and also refuse to remember and mourn his brother Abel. *Sula* and *Sethe* both victims and victimizers re-enact the myth of Cain. They also bear Cain's mark, a mark that sets each woman apart both from personal identity and from community and each must undergo mourning and memory to find and define the self. When *Sethe* accepts her mark, she finds the true meaning of her name. She is no longer Cain, the exile, but is both set, crucified by the tree on her back and *Seth*, the son who carries on the line of Adam and Eve and who foreshadows Christ (Jones, 2000). Toni Morrison accords a prophetic quality to literature: she describes the writer as a "witness bearer," by drawing the examples from the Old Testament narrative of Shadrach's deliverance from the fiery furnace (Daniel 3/8-30) and John the Baptist's proclamation that Christ will baptize with fire instead of water (Mathew 3:11-12) to illustrate her theodicy (Foulks, 2008).

In *Beloved*, *Paradise* and *A Mercy* mothers are estranged from daughters and women are separated by a deceptive color line, but mothers and daughters alike remain subject to sexual violence in spite of their ethnic identities. In each novel, portrays female subjects, in crisis due to motherloss, but each of these crises is more than a singular instance of personal bereavement (Cox, 2013). Morrison uses irony in order to bring the communities together. People of *Ruby* make use of the bread which is baked in the convent for their daily sustenance. That shows the people of *Ruby* compromises some of their independence and to become reliant on the produce grown by the women of the convent. Their actions invert the opening line of the Lord's Prayer, which requests, "*Our Father who art in heaven, give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*" and instead becomes, "*Our Mother, who art on earth, sell us today our daily bread.*" Morrison

uses the stratagem of buying food – "*man does not live by bread alone*" – to represent the spiritual nurturance available at the convent, "*a big stone house in the middle of nothing*," an environment created to attract the people of *Ruby* for healing rather than the abode of evil. Morrison's fiction gives us the connectedness towards the women flock, where in common experience of emotional or spiritual distress as a result of their lives together within the convent and receiving the spiritual instruction (Selassie, 2009, pp. 128-130). "Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see." Quote Mark Twain.

By naming the novel, *Song of Solomon* and the biblical *Solomon* looks on an affair that threatens to disrupt his own system of values. Morrison identifies flying as the "central metaphor" of *Song of Solomon*. The lovers in the *Song of Songs* take flight as well. Morrison's *Solomon* transcends the oppressive forces that had once contained him, the biblical lovers move horizontally. The *Song of Songs* marked by the absence of the divine. Morrison's *Ruth* is a pathetic and pitiable creature, a woman entirely cut off from her own desire, her body thoroughly abandoned and rejected by her husband. But where the biblical *Ruth* leaves her family – her father – behind, Morrison's *Ruth* stands her ground literally (Benedrix, 2008). The biblical *Ruth* becomes "*mother of the Messiah*" once she has abandoned her own self, home, and beliefs.

In "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Allen Alexander make the following complexity of divinity in Morrison's fiction: In Morrison's fictional world, God's characteristics are not limited to those represented by the notion of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. God possesses a fourth face, one that is an explanation for all those things- the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and the just- that seems inexplicable in the face of a religion and Christian tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God (Jennings, 2008, pp. 23-30). The Bible is read and interpreted rarely by the character-but often by the author herself. Morrison's use of Bible as an intertext has led her to the conclusion that the principles of St. Paul's letters is the most relevant and closest to Morrison's concept of Christianity; and St. Paul's faith, the generous love that Morrison advocates is free of the desire to possess. Her fiction addresses spirituality, religious experience and the concept of love in the face of a materialist world. The intertextuality in Morrison's work is extremely complex and

double-edged. It is a fact about literary texts –the fact that they are all intimately interconnected; every text is affected by all; the texts that came before it, since those texts influenced the authors' thinking and aesthetic choices (Suranyi, 2008).

Of course, Morrison herself has been very successful as a writer and as a university teacher. Apart from winning the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), she won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction with *Beloved* (1987) and the 1978 National Critics' Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Song of Solomon (1977). In *Tar Baby* (1981) she became the first African-American woman to remain on the New York Times' and on the cover of Newsweek. Toni Morrison as an author with depth and brilliance is perhaps the most celebrated contemporary American novelist. Her career as a novelist begins with *The Bluest Eye* published in 1970, *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), and *God Help the Child* (2015). Morrison's impact upon the world and her recognition in 11 novels, a play, a short story, a collection of critical essays, and several edited volumes have brought greater laurels in African American writings.

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