

# Toni Morrison: Writing with a Difference, A Critical Study

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## Abstract

*Toni Morrison was fearless, always an activist. Even in simply saying. "I am a black woman writer". Morrison had worked as an editor in publishing, so she was mindful of an absence of a particular voice in that literature. A black woman's identity is an absolutely a long journey of self awareness and realization of her presence in a patriarchal society where her position is second class whether being a female or a black. Toni Morrison's novels explore the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. Many influential writers through their power and their books were the driving force for a better change of the society. Morrison's political activism enabled her to engage herself to liberate black Americans and to spread out freedom and equality all over the world as her unique voice was heard worldwide. Writing does not engage mere amusement or imagination. It evokes certain social responsibilities too. She writes to educate white and black society about the realities of the 'Black Experience' which consists of the deprivation and disgrace of the black community in the hands of the various social, economic, political, racial, and gender prejudices. Toni Morrison was a national treasure. Her writing was not just beautiful but meaningful-a challenge to our conscience and a call to greater empathy. Thus, this article gives her readers a glimpse to explore the magnificent writings which she has contributed to the literature world.*

**Key word:** identity, gender, racism, sexism, slavery, social equality, and empathy

## Introduction

African –American Literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by the writers of African descent. It begins with the works of such late 18<sup>th</sup> century writers as Phillis Wheatley. Before the high point slave narratives, African- American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. The genre known as slave narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were accounts by people who had generally escaped from slavery, about their journeys to freedom and ways they claimed their lives. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a great period of flowering in literature and the arts, influenced both by writers who came North in the great migration and those who were immigrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. African –American writers have been recognized by the highest awards, including the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature is the role of African- Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery and social equality. African-American writing has

tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues or rap.

## Biography of Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison's original name was Chloe Anthony Wofford. She was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, to Afro-American parents. Her father, George Wofford, was a ship-welder: while her mother, Ramah, was a home-maker. In 1949, Morrison entered Howard University in Washington, D.C. There she began to be known as Toni. She received her B.A. degree in English in 1953. It was the most distinguished black college of America. She continued her studies at Cornell University at Ithaca, New York. In 1955, she completed her M.A. for which she even wrote a thesis on suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. And in 1958, she married her Jamaican husband, Harold Morrison, who was a student of architecture at that time. But their union was not a happy one. However, even today she refuses to talk about her ex-husband. Such a stand is quite unlikely to her open and frank personality. Their marriage was short lived and ended

in 1964. Later, she moved to Syracuse and then to New York with her two very young sons – Harold and Shade. There she supported herself and her kids by working as a book editor. Significantly, as an editor she continued to contribute in bringing black literature into the focus of the mainstream literature. Morrison, who became the first African American woman to win a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, also wrote multiple books for children, an opera and two plays. 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.

### Literary Archaeology

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, (1970) published at the height of the Black Aesthetics movement where in the question of 'Black is Beautiful' and also challenges the readers to consider the seeds of black self-hatred. It investigates the ways that family values, gender and community shape both individual and cultural identity (Beaulieu, 2003). It gives a strong narrative voice gives a sensitive delineation of the miseries of black life. Toni Morrison's debut novel immerses us in the tragic, torn lives of a poor black family- Pauline, Cholly, Sam and Pecola- in post- Depression 1940s Ohio. Unlovely and unloved, Pecola prays each night for blue eyes like those of her privileged white schoolfellows. *The Bluest Eye* shows how the past savagely defines the present (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1970)

*Sula* (1973) also published during the Black Aesthetic movement where raises the questions about Black

women's individualism and Independence. For both Sula and Nel, life and its choices are defined more by what they are not than by what they are; being "neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph were forbidden to them, they had set about creating something to be" (Rigney, 1991) . A desire for a safe retreat is a common human trait; the need for a protective and nurturing space is extremely undeniable. Those denied the luxury of a private room must accommodate their needs to the reality of surroundings; sheltering spaces, by necessity, take a variety of forms in Morrison's fiction. Nel Wright seeks a comforting place after discovering her husband and best friend in an affair in *Sula*. Nel's requirements are minimalistic in nature--- a "small and bright" place. She instinctively looks for a nest-like retreat, an enclosed space which functions as both container and a barrier to the harsh realities confronting her (Russell, 2006).

*Song of Solomon* (1977) was published at a time when black males were asserting their 'manhood' based on economic advancement and dominance. Toni Morrison has written a brilliant prose tale that surveys nearly a century of American history as it impinges on a single family. *Song of Solomon* grips as a novel of extraordinary truth, wisdom and humour. This novel begins in 1931s America with Macon Dead Jr, the son of a wealthy black property owner, who has been brought up to revere the white world. Macon learns about the tyranny of white society from his friend Guitar, though he is more concerned to escape the familial tyranny of his own father. So while Guitar joins a terrorist group of poor blacks, Macon goes home to the south, lured by tales of buried family treasure. But his odyssey back home and a deadly confrontation with Guitar leads to the discovery of something infinitely more valuable than gold: his past and the origins of his true self. It is a complex, wonderfully alive and imaginative story .....glittering.

With the publication of *Tar Baby*, (1981) Morrison raised issues concerning middle class black women whose education and personal achievements create tension within and outside the black community (Fultz, 2003). Jadine and Son are both black American but with very different backgrounds. Jadine turns out to be a beautiful model with good education. She is an orphan but has a white couple called the Streets (Margaret and Valerian) as her patron in a Caribbean island with her aunt-uncle (Ondine and Sydney) serving them as domestic servants. Surprisingly,

Son is a mere fugitive caught hiding inside Mrs. Street's closet. Jadine and Son leave together for America in order to search for a place where they will both feel comfortable and settle down as home. Toni Morrison's writing is a train that knows where it's going, fierce and fast-moving in narrative, lyrically showy in description. It also takes one to the sheer edge of human relationships.

Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), and Paradise (1998), invoke early and contemporary American and African American History. Toni Morrison's novels Beloved, Jazz and Paradise are considered a Trilogy because they are connected by their shared focus on the relationship between excessive love and violence: Beloved on Maternal love, Jazz on Romantic love and Paradise on Religious or Communal love. These fictions call into question the African American communities' struggles against racism, its ability to recognize and involve the conflicts within that community and to challenge class and gender formations within the black community (Fultz, 2003). Toni Morrison shows us in Beloved and Sula that we are bound together through story and action. All three novels, invoke early and contemporary American and African American History. It is the mid-1800s and as slavery looks to be coming to an end, Sethe is haunted by the violent trauma it wrought on her former enslaved life at Sweet Home, Kentucky. Her dead baby daughter, whose tombstone bears the single word, Beloved, returns as a spectre to punish her mother, but also to elicit her love. Told with heart-stopping clarity, melding horror and beauty, Beloved is Toni Morrison's enduring masterpiece. Morrison has created a frightening, beautiful and intensely exciting novel about America and its past. Morrison's writing of a black romance pays its debt to blues music, the rhythms and the melancholy pleasures of which she has so magically transformed into a novel. Jazz blazes with an intensity more usually found in tragic poetry of the past, not in fiction today.... Morrison's voice transcends colour and creed and she has become one of America's outstanding post-war writers'. Joe Trace – in his fifties, door-to-door salesman of Cleopatra beauty products, erstwhile devoted husband – shoots dead his lover of three months – the impetuous, eighteen-year-old Dorcas. At the funeral, his determined, hard-working wife Violet, who is given to stumbling into dark mental cracks, tries with a knife to disfigure the corpse. Passionate and profound, Jazz brings us back and forth in time, in a

narrative assembled from the hopes, fears and realities of black urban life. Toni Morrison's latest literary triumph.... Paradise is based around eight chapters, each bearing a woman's name, each adding a different point of view to the narrative. Its set in Ruby, a fictitious black town founded by proud, racially pure men who emerged from the fight against slavery only to find there was yet another hierarchy – this time based on gradations of skin colour – to keep them down. Yet the myth of Ruby's own racial genealogy, its piety and self-righteousness, its fragile and the women, who skirt the town's boundaries, preferring to take refuge in their own company, threaten to blow it apart.

Love (2003), is a novel that demands to be read at least twice, for it is so rich and satisfying that it sweeps you into a subtle world that you need time to take in.....quite breathtaking. Love's power lies in the luminosity and energy of its poetic images. Love is about family dynamics and interpersonal relationships. It is a story dealing with the various shades and varieties of love. Love in its most heartfelt form is genuine and timeless. However, when love is unresolved, unrequited and betrayed; then 'hatred' is its outcome. Love is like trying to put together a giant jigsaw puzzle. The central narrative focuses on the troubled relationship between Heed, Cosey's second wife, and Christine, his granddaughter- best friends until Cosey married Heed at age eleven- and their lifelong struggle over Cosey's inheritance (Tally, 2007). Love is a brilliant book.....Into a short narrative she packs mystery, suspense and a multi-stranded tale told with extraordinary deftness.

A Mercy (2008) is a novel based on the early American slavery system. It reveals a very complex and yet delicate relationship that a mother shares with her daughter. The story unfolds the dejection a young black girl, Florens, happens to experience and what she feels as she gets sent away by her slave mother with an unknown stranger. She recollects her "Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone," but then a "minha mae begs no" with her baby boy still at her breast and she says to take the girl, her daughter instead of him. This disappointment is hard to forget or forgive. However, the novel ends with the revelation of the last act of mercy that the slave mother manages to shower upon her beloved daughter. Floren's mother reveals the shocking truth regarding Floren's birth as well as the

touching story of 'mercy' she was able to receive. It is a heart-wrenching tale of a helpless slave woman and mother working hard for the survival and safety of her daughter. A Mercy novel left anyone trembling at the sheer brilliance of its storytelling and the unassailable dignity of its purpose. It is enthralling that you will want to read it more than once.

The novel *Home* (2012) is also a meditation on the significance of reading and writing as empowerment and on the importance of knowledge and understanding necessary for the negotiation of lives as lived through the Depression, migration, segregation and war. An angry and self-loathing veteran of the Korean War, Frank Money finds himself back in racist America after enduring trauma on the front lines that left him with more than just physical scars. As Frank revisits the memories from childhood and the war that leave him questioning his shattered sense of self, he unearths the courage he thought he'd lost forever. With dialogue that speaks itself aloud off the page, the incantatory power of Morrison's language reveals an apparently defeated man finding his manhood- and, finally, his home. Morrison's writing is so deft that even barely sketched characters leap off the page. She displays her veteran ability to combine physical and social immediacy with psychological and emotional subtlety

*God Help the Child* (2015), proved Morrison, her writing was still as fresh, adventurous and vigorous as ever. In this novel, Sweetness wants to love her child, Bride, but she struggles to love her as a mother should. Bride, now glamorous, grown up, ebony-black and panther-like, wants to love her man, Booker, but she finds herself betrayed by a moment in her past, a moment borne of a desperate burn for the love of her mother. Booker cannot fathom Bride's depths, with his own love-lorn past bending him out of shape. Can they find a way through the damaged wrought on their blameless childhood souls, to light and happiness, free from pain? It is so perfectly written, full of perfect sentences..... with such profound understanding of sympathy for her damaged characters..... This is a wise, humane, enriching novel. If it should prove to be Toni Morrison's last, it is quite a finale (Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 2015).

### Writing with a Difference

Toni Morrison has described writing as: "the only thing I do for myself alone". According to her, writing is open and free

thinking for the writer and the reader alike. She writes both for herself and for others. Morrison emerged as a writer and published her first novels during the period of the Black Aesthetic movement. She is known for a self-conscious and self-reflexive writer. Her fiction invites her readers to be directly and self-consciously involved in the writing (Fultz, 2003). Writing does not involve mere entertainment or imagination. It evokes certain social responsibilities too. Morrison has admitted that she has always thought well when she writes. According to her there are two aims of her writing, one is to equally demanding and sophisticated. Secondly, the emotional appeal should be captivating like 'jazz'. Further, she has felt a driving urge to write about the most marginalized group of people called blacks. In Morrison's view, racism itself is a scholarly pursuit. In fact, black literature itself is taught as a kind of tolerance and part of sociology. And that's why education and leadership becomes the only weapon to combat any racial discrimination. Morrison has contributed much to the literature world. Some of her novels do speak volumes of her calibre in her writing. I have tried to evaluate eleven of her novels in which she points out the difference that she makes in writing.

The recent brutal murder of George Floyd has brought to the fore concerns over the law enforcement's bias against the African American minority. Brutality on the African Americans by the racially based police is not new. It is a contradiction that racial discrimination still persists in America, a country that claims to be the first in the world to be the first in the world to be founded on equality. According to Fr. Bryan Massingale, a Catholic theologian, "Racism is a sickness of the soul. This sickness has been spread since the first Africans were forcibly brought to America and sold as slaves 400 years ago. Our nation is one founded and continuously shaped by white supremacy" (Prakash, 2020). In responding to Floyd's death, some have used violence, for any of us, the singular voice of Dr. Martin Luther King still rings true: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

### Conclusion

In the passing of Toni Morrison, we lost one of our greatest voices and story teller. Her writing makes us understand that writing was a profession. Her writing was beautiful, meaningful challenge to our conscience and our moral

imagination, says Ex-President Obama in his tribute to Morrison. Being a fearless activist, and acknowledging herself as a black woman writer, she rejected the opportunity to be swallowed up by the institutions who wanted to embrace her talent, but minimise her race or gender. She just rejected the dichotomy as being a great lawyer and a black lawyer, or a great writer and a black writer. Right to the end, she concerned herself with the day-to-day experience of people; what was going on at any moment in the lives of black people always shaped her writing and her vision for what was necessary. Her legacy is par excellence. She is magnificent and her emotional intelligence is second to none and her bravery didn't care about what others thought but she just told the naked truth, so she was equal to artistry. As I conclude this article, my strongest appeal to the readers, to be the voice of the voiceless just like Toni Morrison who became a hope, power and freedom through her fiction. At the end, I would like to quote given by Dr. Martin Luther Jr. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

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