

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: PARAMETERS OF SELF IDENTITY

Toni Morrison (1931 -) is one of the leading contemporary African-American women novelists. The fact is affirmed by her winning Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Morrison earned an M.A. degree in English at Cornell University, where she completed a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. From 1955 to 1957 she taught English at Texas Southern University, and from 1957 to 1964 she taught at Howard. In 1965, she became a senior editor at Random House. She resumed her teaching career a decade later, serving as a visiting professor at Yale between 1976 and 1978. Then, from 1984 to 1989 as the Albert Schweitzer professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York at Albany. In 1989 she became the Robert G. Goheen Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University, where she remains a member of the programme in Afro-American studies and of the creative writing department. If anything, Morrison is the quintessential success story.

While teaching at Howard, Morrison began to write. Morrison has published six novels : The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974), Song of Soloman (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), and Jazz (1992). She has also published a volume of literary criticism : Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992).

Hers has been a career of accolades and acclamation. In 1975 she received Ohoana Book Award for Sula. In 1977 she was awarded with the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Song of Soloman. In 1981 she appeared on the cover of Newsweek and became the first black woman to be so featured on the cover of a national magazine since Zora Neale Hurston. In 1988, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Beloved. Morrison appeared in both the fiction list for Jazz and the non-fiction list for Playing in the dark. Morrison is the first Afro-American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature (1993). As a winner of the Nobel Prize she has become the symbol of African-America, of human struggle against various kinds of oppressions and a global longing for liberation. With the winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Morrison has emerged as one of the greatest celebrities of the times.

Morrison has also received New York State Governor's Art Award, Elizabeth Cady Stanton Award from National Organization for women, Modern language Association of America's Common Wealth Award in Literature and Chianti Ruffino Antico Fattore International Literary Prize. Morrison is the second American woman and the first Afro-American to achieve this status of distinction in the mainstream American literary tradition.

II

Toni Morrison is one of the most sophisticated novelists in the history of Afro-American Literature. Indeed, her accomplishment as a writer is that she has managed, uncannily, to invent her own mode of literary representation. Her themes include the burdens of history, the determining social effects of race, gender, or class coloured with love, death, betrayal for her / his own fate.

In the course of her 25 years career as an author, Morrison has become the American and African-American woman writer to reckon with. While admiring Morrison for her successful contribution in novel writing Trudier Harris says that, Morrison has entered superstardom. He further says,

... Toni Morrison is a phenomenon , in the classic sense of a once-in-lifetime rarity ... ¹

It is an important achievement of Toni Morrison that she is widely read by the broader cross section of the American reading public and also in every continent, by both sexes, and colours, ages and creeds.

Morrison negotiates a very complex matrix of reality in which she is both despised and revered, absent and present, ignored and sought after. Her work articulates Black Cultural Nationalism, which, according to Harry Reed,

... contends that black people possess a culture, style of life, world view, and aesthetic values different from white Americans.²

Morrison in her writings establishes a positive black identity and reasserts racial consciousness through serious exploration and rediscovery of the black community's unique heritage. Thus her novels are the "experience" of the African-American community.

Morrison's writing shows that she is influenced by the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Her unique naturalism is a gift of James Baldwin; who experimented with fiction prose as well as jazz, blues and the whole range of Black secular vernacular speech rituals. Her work spans a great divide between the lyrical modernism of Zora Neale Hurston on the one hand, and the existential naturalist experimentation of Richard Wright on the other.

Morrison looks beyond the people to see what makes black literature different. And in doing so, her own style has evolved. It is not only the style, but it is a style by which, as Morrison says, ' I recognize my own work.' Commenting further on her style Morrison states :

I am not experimental, I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books- the something that defines what makes a book "black".³

Morrison's novels explore the general socio-psychic interaction with reference to black reality in America. The wounded black psyche under white domination is the strongest theme of Morrison's novels. In the interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison says :

I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. It's the complexity of how people behave under duress that is of interest to me. ⁴

The social history found in her novels is a history of daily inescapable assault by a world which denies minimum dignity to the blacks.

More significantly, Morrison's richly textured fiction reflects her special and unique vision which is neither white nor male. In fact, it is a black woman writer's distinctive feminine vision. Her vision as Jung has described in Psychology and Literature, is

a real experience ... it is true symbolic expression ... the experience of something existent in its own right. ⁵

It is this 'real experience' which has been defined by the Swedish Academy as 'an essential aspect of American reality' in Morrison's fiction.

Morrison affirms that writing provides her an opportunity to find coherence in the world. It helps her to sort out the past, her own as well as the collective past of Afro-Americans. Regarding this, Morrison says,

There is no need to be nostalgic about 'the good old days' because they weren't ... but to recognise and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so

much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of black now growing up.⁶

Morrison's motive in rediscovering history reveals how deeply she is concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values and 'qualities of resistance and integrity' that were so much a part of the black women's past.

While Morrison's novels have strong themes, her characters also show their uniqueness. The underlying strain of cruelty and violence erupts in her most sympathetic and victimized characters. They are capable at once of enormous criminality and unmitigated love. They demand both condemnation and admiration, both respect and fear. In fact, they are the representatives of collective black consciousness. Commenting on Morrison's characterization, Terry Otten says,

In Toni Morrison's fiction characters are one way or another enact the historical plight of blacks in American society.⁷

Through her fiction, Morrison inverts conventional moral categories. In a world, warped and distorted by brutish oppression, Morrison shows that, sometimes innocence assumes a criminal nature and evil becomes a regenerative force. In her fictional world, monstrous deeds become expressions of compassion and violent deeds lead to the restoration of love. Hence, the burdens of history, the determining social effects of race, gender and class constitute the major body of her creative concerns.

Where Morrison has come from and what she stands for are embedded effectively in her novels.

As an established member of the literati and a product of America's underclass, Morrison thus brings to her writing a complicated perspective. She employs rational and controlled methods to naturalize increasingly irrational responses to life.

III

Feminism : In the last twenty years many institutions have felt the impact of the feminist revolution. Women are increasingly establishing themselves in previously male-dominated domains. The study of history has begun to include women's history (herstory), a discipline which strives to uncover women's lives and achievements, to acknowledge the contributions of women as scholars, researchers and writers. Today every historical period and literary genre is undergoing reassessment from a feminist perspective.

The term "feminism" was first used in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The meaning of term has been gradually transformed and now it means a "theory of the political, economic and social equalities of the sexes." In the introduction to The Remembered Gate : Origins of American Feminism, Barbara Berg defines feminism as a "broad

movement embracing numerous phases of women's emancipation." She states further :

It is the freedom to decide her own destiny; freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions, freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely to actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of women's rights to individual conscience and judgement. It postulates that women's essential worth stems from common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life.⁸

Since 1960s, feminism has split again and again. Until it has become feminisms, a set of groups, each with its own ideology, identity and agenda. But remarkably, they are linked together. French feminism, Marxist feminism and Modern feminism argue that the cause of the oppression of women lies in the patriarchal system's belief in gender inequalities. The principle aspirations for the rise of feminism since 1960s have been the works of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949), Mary Ellmann's Thinking about women(1968) and Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1970). Their general thrust has been to condemn male attitudes toward women.

Thus, present-day feminism is a historically specific movement, rooted in French Enlightenment thought and in British liberalism, and consequently wedded to deeply critical notions of truth, justice, freedom, and equality. Today feminism is viewed as a rapidly developing major critical ideology. The concept incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and

possesses an international scope. Its developmental stages have been dependent on and in tension with male-centered political and intellectual discourse.

Feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. It is an understanding of what the women are and where they are in the light of what they are not yet. According to Sandra Bartky,

Feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization. To apprehend oneself as victim is to be aware of an alien and hostile force which is responsible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women and for a stifling and oppressive system of sex-roles; it is to be aware, too, that this victimization in no way earned or deserved, is an offence.⁹

In fact, feminist consciousness is a joyous consciousness of one's own power, of the possibility of unprecedented personal growth and of the release of energy long suppressed. This consciousness is effectively reflected in the writings of black women writers. They have demonstrated Susan Griffin's musing injunction in their writings :

We must trust in words, and the coming of words.¹⁰

IV

Black-American Sensibility : For Simone de Beauvoir, " the humanity is male" but for the black women the "humanity is white and male." As Joyce Ladner says,

The Black Woman suffers from the twin burden of being Black and female. ¹¹

The black woman has to struggle for equality as a woman and as an African-American. Thus their experiences gained from living as African-American women stipulate their sensibility which can be named as black feminist sensibility.

The black women's ability to forge the individual, unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective stand-point is a key to black women's survival. For the black woman, the struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously Afrocentric which reveals the black perspective and at the same time feminist sensibility.

By being accountable to others, African-American woman develops more fully human and less objectified self. Sonia Sanchez points this version of self by stating,

We must move past always focusing on the "personal self" because there is a larger self. There is a "self" of black people. ¹²

The social manipulation has had a lasting impact on the real lives and literary images of black American women. Consequently, they have developed certain peculiar ways of looking at the society at large and their own problems and life in relation to the blackmen, white men and women. In order to express their understanding about themselves and life, the black women writers use certain themes, narrative strategies, images, symbols and sources of languages quite different from those used by the white men and women or the black men writers for that matter. Their novels reflect their black feminist sensibility. Alienated and isolated from the "real world power" of white patriarchy, black women writers concern themselves with a kind of domesticity "that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womnhood."¹³ As Morrison states :

How to survive whole in the world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something. ¹⁴

is the paramount issue of black feminist consciousness.

The black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor have freed themselves from ideological and literary preparation. By doing so they have transformed the African-American text into a limitless medium of discovery and affirmation. They write to reclaim both their history and self-image, battered by racism, classism and sexism.

In fact, it is black women writers who have been chiefly responsible for redefining and reaffirming the African-American feminist self by liberating it from the shackles of race, class and gender.

V

The present dissertation modestly attempts to make a comprehensive critical statement on the novels of Toni Morrison with special reference to her three novels viz.,

1. The Bluest Eye, 2. Sula, 3. Beloved.

It takes up the challenge of exploring all the thematic complexities in the context of Morrison's quest for meaningful black female identity in the light of the theoretical frame outlined earlier. The dissertation is divided into five chapters.

The approach taken in the study is purely a thematic one. But as and when necessary, language and style aspects are also taken into consideration in order to reinforce the argument. The attempt has been made to explore the black feminist sensibility in the man-woman relationship, the woman-woman relationship and the master-servant relationship found in the novels under analysis. Hence, the study uses feminist theory that is committed to the politics of exploring, explaining and validating women's experience and to ending women's oppression in

the highly charged racist, and sexist society of America for analysing the quest undertaken by the black women characters for the meaningful black identity. It also tries to place Morrison in the tradition of African-American novel which is being enriched by women novelists like Paule Marshall, Gloriya Naylor, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara in the light of her contribution both in terms of thematic complexities and technical innovations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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