

CHAPTER V

**CONCLUSION:
FROM OPPRESSION TO TRIUMPH
OF THE SELF**

In the foregoing chapters of the dissertation the novels : The Bluest Eye, Sula and Beloved by Toni Morrison have been analysed. The novels are based on African-American feminist consciousness and are bound together with the theme of African-Americanness which includes love, friendship, beauty, ugliness, death, individual's collision with an oppressive environment, the evils like : oppression, racialism and poverty, slavery and the exploited femininity. The elaborate use of symbols and the rich anthropological love of Africa provides her novels with the necessary balance of authenticity.

Although Morrison's major characters all struggle toward womanhood, their sense of what it means is drastically different. For Pecola, womanhood means being loved; for Nel, it is a straight narrow line; for Sula , to be a woman means self-fulfilment, for Sethe it is a strong love towards her children. Morrison's first novel The Bluest Eye explores the reasons why it is so difficult for black women to achieve the definition of womanhood ascribed to by American society and still remains true to their racial identity. The second novel Sula, penetrates further beyond the norms of any community, black or white, although through them, to a deeper analysis of selfhood as woman. And the third novel Beloved, shows the slave woman's endeavour to establish her 'self' by cutting the cycle of slavery. In this connection, Morrison's novels are quest tales in

which the key characters search for the hidden sign capable of giving them strength and/or identity.

Morrison's novels are not only about individuals, but the historical context can not be denied in any one of them --- whether it is the place and role of African-American women, or the horrific institution of slavery and its aftermath, or the mass movement to the urban North from the South, or the effect of the Depression years and after, or even the Nigger joke of the Bottom.

Morrison has not proclaimed herself to be a black feminist as vehemently as writers such as Gloriya Naylor, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith and Deborah McDowell. However, in her novels: The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Beloved, she goes much deeper, into the very roots of racism and sexism. In a subtle way, she reveals the ideological basis of these pernicious social evils. To bring them out effectively, Morrison digs out the legends, myths, folk stories and folk songs of African Americans. Although African -American life and cultural values are not allowed to lived in the white world, Morrison urges the African-Americans not to forget but to reclaim and celebrate their heritage. Hence, Morrison's novels from The Bluest Eye to Jazz constitute a long search for a representative African-American voice.

As the blacks are the vanquished and the white are the victors and again the black women are vanquished among the vanquished, they develop a Janus-faced perception. The vanquished has to follow the life style of the victors. Being a sensitive black woman writer, Morrison has tried to highlight this kind of dilemma of black women in her first novel, The Bluest Eye.

In the novel, Morrison has focused the spurious criteria of beauty and its cause and effect relationship to love: if one is pretty, one is loved. Here Morrison rejects those standards of beauty that exclude and torment the black women who are already torn between self-love and self-loathing. In this connection, The Bluest Eye is an unrelenting reminder of the futility of imitating a discriminatory standards in hopes of attaining an even more unrealistic state of perfect love. Morrison has herself described the novel as a novel "about one's dependency on the world for identification, self-value and feeling of worth."¹ Hence, the novel is an attack on the ideal standards of beauty because its acceptance itself is the greatest barrier of the spiritual and psychic health of the black community.

Pecola Breedlove, the central character of the novel, painfully searches self-esteem, a means of imposing order on the chaos of her world. Because a sense of self-worth and the correlative stability that would accompany it are unavailable to her in the familiar or wider

environment, she creates a subjective world of fantasy. She desires for blue eyes, which she believes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. In fact, the desire for blue eyes is an evidence of Pecola's frustration with her identity, with her world and of her longing for herself. However, when she fails in her quest, she becomes mad. Thus, through the character of Pecola, Morrison criticizes the acceptance of white standards of beauty by black women.

In the novel, Pecola is juxtaposed with her friend Claudia MacTeer who faces the same world that Pecola faces. However, she does not become prey to the white value system like Pecola. In fact, Claudia's self-consciousness protects her from the deadly destruction but Pecola can not evade the same destruction. Claudia rejects the white values as they are alien and threatening to her. She can do so because her parents have enabled her to maintain her 'self'. Claudia is able to survive as the MacTeers have the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of racist society and to provide affectionate upbringing of their children. On the other hand, Pecola's family fails in helping Pecola to survive in such society only because the family is without those resources. Consequently, Pecola takes shelter into madness while pursuing her quest for beautiful eyes. But Claudia by trying to gain maturity and understanding finally perceives the depth of her involvement in Pecola's descent into madness.

Thus, by providing two similar characters, Morrison reveals how Eurocentric standards play havoc with the life of these girls. Thus, Pecola's failure in creating her authentic identity and thereby surviving in the highly charged racist and sexist American society ensues from Pecola's blind imitation of western value system, equally diseased mal-nourishment given by her parents during her childhood and her alienation from the black community.

In Sula, Morrison depicts the quest of the protagonist, Sula, for creating her own self and coming to terms with her identity as a black and female. Through Sula, Morrison demonstrates difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self.

Sula is remarkably different from other black women. She lives out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to explore anybody. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, Sula's is an experimental life. In her childhood, she has learnt that she has "no centre, no speck around which to grow." Hence she sets herself on a mission-the mission of making "herself". Consequently, every activity that she performs is in the continuation of her relentless efforts to make herself and to attain her unified black female self.

Morrison brings out the predominant traits of Sula's personality by providing another character Nel Wright, Sula's childhood friend. The uniqueness of their friendship lies in their ability to transcend the differences in their family background and life styles to share a single vision. Both of them are the two necessary ingredients for self exploration and fulfilment. However, though they share strong bonds, they are different. Nel participates in the orthodox rites of the Bottom. For Sula , nurturing, at least in a traditionally female way, is a contradiction; but for Nel, it is fulfilment. For Sula , love is synonymous with freedom, whereas to Nel, love means security.

Yet, though Nel's outlook is different than that of Sula , she achieves a sense of identity / a sense of me-ness only because of her friendship with Sula . With Sula , Nel has succeeded in exploring her potentialities, which has transformed her life to a greater extent. But her survival is confined to the Bottom as she is left with 'just circles and circles of sorrow'. On the other hand, Sula tries to create an identity for herself believing that she exists 'beyond the community and social expectations.' While establishing her identity, she comes to terms with herself and defies the male and white dominated societal norms. Though she has to pay heavy cost, she tries to live unto the standards that she wants to create for herself. Hence, hers is a world that is based on black feminist consciousness.

Sula's journey is suggestive of the journey black women are forced to undertake at some point in their lives, for it seems the world over is bent on diminishing them to sex objects. More significantly, for most women like Sula, the journey is not physical but a mental flight into a fertile dialogue with her peers. Thus, Morrison's Sula, allows her readers to become aware of not only the different perceptions of values but also the motivations behind these values.

Thus, Sula is fundamentally a woman's novel. Even though a good deal of the work derives from the consequences of male/female relationships; it is the self-perception of the woman and her subsequent reactions to self concept that are the central issues of the novel.

In the novel Beloved, Morrison gives searching attention to the ghostly influence of slavery, racism, and the dead in the racialized, gendered, class-marked life-stories of her different characters - female, male, black and white. The thematic potential in Beloved is immense. In the novel, one of Morrison's most spell-binding womanist remembrances of things past, Morrison interweaves racial and sexual issues with the theme of motherhood and treats them at various levels of human experience- socio-psychological, legendary, and mythic. Speaking in many compelling voices and on many levels, the narrative of Beloved deals with Sethe's racial freedom and psychological wholeness. More

significantly, it retells the chilling historical account of a compassionate yet resolute mother's "tough love" for her children.

Beloved is mainly a story of a black female slave who develops an awareness about her own sub-human status on the Sweet-Home Plantation which ultimately awakens and forces her to develop "quest for meaning and wholeness in slavery and in freedom."

Being a female slave herself and also well informed about the atrocities faces by Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law and her own mother, she thinks time and again about the future of her own children. While insisting upon her role as a mother, she can not recognize the separateness of her children and thus makes life-and-death decision for them. In fact, Sethe kills her beloved baby because she herself is surrounded by the most immoral and unjust world where injustice and self-respect can not be restored except by way of injustice and self destruction. Thus, Sethe moves from the state of total ignorance and unawareness about herself towards the state of totally awakened self.

Unlike other black women, Sethe is different because she liberates herself and her children from the given fate. Though Sethe commits a horrendous act, her killing of her baby which is based upon faith and conviction has a transcending quality about it. Thus, however repulsive Sethe's act may be her intentions redeem her from any narrow moral and

legalistic frame and reference. Indeed, the exculpatory fact is that she takes a quantum jump into faith by her instinctive rebellion against the pervasive evils of an oppressive system. Sethe's act of killing her daughter and thereby achieving a liberation from the cycle of slavery in particular for her daughter, and by extension, her community in general shows her triumph in surviving in an alien world.

Thus, in Beloved, Morrison's feminist consciousness is given a new dimension of meaning through the characterization of Sethe. Morrison is not only concerned with what history has recorded in the slave narratives but what it has omitted; the "unspeakable past" of the black slave woman.

Thus, the woman's search for her self and the female bonding is important in Morrison's novels. Claudia's self-esteem, Sula's individualistic self, Sethe's and Denver's realization of their selves show that bonding between women is an integral part of Morrison's novels. Her novels demonstrate her heroine's journey towards selfhood though sometimes they fail. Pecola tries to gain selfhood by imitating western value system but fails in achieving it. But Sula and Sethe succeed in establishing their identity in the highly charged racist and sexist society.

Morrison celebrates the black feminist self in her novels. Her female characters Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia, the prostitutes, Eva Peace, Nel Wright,

Hannah, Sula , Sethe, Baby Suggs all possess self-esteem and dignity. But Morrison's male characters are weak men. They are incapable of living with dignity and self-respect. Cholly Breedlove, Eva's husband Boy Boy, Eva's son Plum, Hannah's husband Rekus, Sethe's husband Halle Suggs are placed in strong contrast to Eva, Hannah, Sethe, and even Sula who are strong and capable enough to challenge the dominant society and the overwhelming odds. Thus, Morrison projects the sexual and marital problems of her black women characters. Here, Morrison is equally concerned about what her characters do not have as well as what they have.

As wounded black psyche under white domination is Morrison's strongest theme, she shows the way black people feel physically injured and the way their wounded black psyche works on their behaviour in its various forms. Pecola goes mad; Cholly rapes his daughter; Sula longs for identity; Sethe kills her own daughter. But the same circumstances breed sanity, balance and constructive conduct in people like the MacTeers, Nel Wright, Baby Suggs, Paul D and Stamp Paid. Hence, through these characters, Morrison shows how the psychological torment forces the black people to respond either negatively or positively.

Thus, the complex range of emotions within which Morrison writes constitute a tenuous balance between negation and affirmation of selfhood

and place within the community. Her characters waver within the contradictions and ambiguities of desire and repression, control and chaos, attraction and repulsion, connection and withdrawal.

Through memory and story, dream and song, each of Morrison's narratives continually focuses beyond the isolated, dystopian self and toward the potentialities of a desired, collective self. This collective self finds expression in Claudia's neighbourhood retrospection, in Nel's cognitional cry, and in Paul D's consolation, and most certainly in Sethe's rememory of communal joys and sorrows.

Morrison's characters acknowledge, however vaguely, that they must search for identity by returning to the neighbourhood and to the communal experience. They do so in order, as Morrison has said, "to survive whole in a world where (they) are all .. victims of something."² Thus, Morrison's community for better or worse, has the power to become the site of renewal for its members. Their response to the call of communal experience determines forever their course in life and allows them a significant measure of home and comfort and wholeness in an otherwise alienating and lonely world of victims and victimizers.

In depicting a totality of communal emotions and experience, Morrison's novels demonstrate that the community is a multiple, refractory space within each self which, as it dispossesses and nurtures, deceives

and instructs, assails and comforts, serves as the ultimate touchstone in the search for self and place. Morrison thus shows us the various responses of black people to their specific situation in America. She admits,

I don't want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about ...³

Morrison's novels prove the fact that the more the theme is localized, the more the spirit will be universalized. In all her novels under study, Morrison has used black lore, black music, black language and all the myths and rituals of black culture, and moreover the predicament of black people to convey the humanitarian zeal of the great literature of the world. So it is fair to say that her fiction belongs to the great humanistic tradition of world literature.

Thus because of Morrison's contribution to the body of African American literary tradition both in terms of thematic complexity and technical innovations, Morrison enjoys a very high position in the broad community of the contemporary African-American women novelists which includes among its significant citizens ^{writers like} Alice Walker, Gloriya Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara as well as many more. The novels written by these writers trace out the diverse experiences of the black women in a hostile environment. They seem to constitute the vanguard of a brewing protest

movement which upholds the dignity of a female and exposes the designs of rapacious men.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Nellie Mckay. "An Interview with Toni Morrison". Contemporary Literature 24, (1983), p.421.