Sumedha Bhandari

Toni Morrison's Art

A Humanistic Exploration of *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*

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FOR MY LITTLE MUNCHKINS...

KAVYA AND AARIV

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CONTENTS

THE UNSPOKEN LEXIS OF TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

Toni Morrison, the eighth American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, was born Chloe Anthony Wofford. Her family had migrated North to escape racial prejudice and to seek educational and employment opportunities. In Ohio, Morrison was predominantly surrounded by racist whites. However, this did not impede her growth and success. She attended Lorain High School, where she excelled as a student. She was a member of the student council, worked in the school library (an honor at her school), and was an associate editor of the high school yearbook. She graduated with honors.

Morrison attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious colleges. There she was shocked to find ostentation among the students around her. Most people seemed interested in socializing, their physical appearance, and going to parties. Morrison was mostly concerned with her studies and sometimes found it difficult to find a place at Howard. People had trouble pronouncing her name, so she shortened it to her middle name, Anthony. This later became her now accepted name, "Toni." She majored in English and minored in classics. While at school, she showed interest in the theater and became a member of the Howard University Players, the campus theatrical company. After graduating from Howard, she received a Master's degree in English from Cornell University in 1955. From there, Morrison went to Texas Southern University in Houston, to teach introductory English.

In 1957, Morrison returned to Howard as a member of the faculty where she had the opportunity to teach and to meet many students who later became famous writers and civil rights activists. Some of these students included: the poet Amiri Baraka; Mayor of Atlanta, Andrew Young; civil rights activist and leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Stokely Carmichael; and finally the famous writer, Claude Brown.

At Howard, Morrison met and fell in love with an architect from Jamaica, Harold Morrison. They were married in 1958 and had their first son, Harold Ford, in 1961. Although her marriage was not complete bliss, Morrison and her husband stayed together for six years. In 1964, the family moved to Europe and Morrison became pregnant with her second child. However, by the time she returned from

Europe, her marriage had ended. She attributes her marriage failure to the cultural differences between her and her husband. When Morrison returned from Europe, she moved to Syracuse, New York, where she worked as an associate editor with a textbook subsidiary of Random House. She worked hard during the days and came home to parent her two sons. Then, at night, she would work on her writing, and specifically, the book that would bring her world acclaim, The Bluest Eye. Morrison drew on many of her own life experiences and memories growing up in Lorain, Ohio to write this first book. After twenty years of editing for Random House, Morrison left in 1984 to become a professor at the State University of New York in Albany. She worked there for five years, working on many literary pieces. But in the spring of 1989 she left and became the first African-American woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League university. She was named the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University. She taught in the creative writing program, and participated in the African-American studies, American studies, and women's studies departments. Her plethora of work includes novels like The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby *(1981)*, Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), Paradise (1998), Love (2003); miscellaneous writings like: Dreaming Emmet (performed 1986, but unpublished), Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination *(*1992), Remember: The Journey to School Integration (2004); and for children, with son Slade Morrison she wrote: The Big Box *(*1999), The Book of Mean People *(*2002), The Lion or the Mouse? (2003), The Ant or the Grasshopper? (2003), and The Poppy or the Snake *(*2004).

Before customizing the work of Toni Morrison it is necessary to delineate the character of Afro-American fiction. It is primarily a social treatise which deals with the social, psychological and humanistic milieu. It is a microcosm of the entire Afro-American existence. It has a plot, a structure, a language intertwined with cultural symbols, patterns, beliefs and practices and the author’s point of view or vision. Through their pen Afro-American writers try to comprehend the overwhelming nature of life. Afro-American women writers in the seventies and eighties like Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Alexis De Veau have been able to explore the self as central rather than marginal entity. Early Afro- American writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Frances Harper, Jessica Fauset, Nella Larsen and Ann Petry had also tried their hand in this direction. Quest for personal freedom, demand for respect and a desire for a self, were the major themes for these novelists.

Toni Morrison is, perhaps the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature who astutely describes aspects of human lives. There are many writers in the world who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world, Morrison shows her uniqueness and exquisiteness by revealing the hope and beauty that underlines this ugliness. Her artistic excellence lies in achieving a perfect balance between black literature and writing what is universally true. Although firmly grounded in the cultural heritage and social concerns of black Americans, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature, exhibiting universal mythical patterns and overtones. Her novels, thus, mourn on universal concerns. The signal accomplishment of Toni Morrison as a writer is that she has managed uncannily to invert her own mode of literary representation. Her themes are often those expected of naturalistic fiction-the burdens of history, the determining social effects of race, gender, or class-but they are also the great themes of lyrical modernism-love, death, betrayal, and burden of individual responsibility for her or his own fate. Like Golding, her novels have a fabulistic quality as she has been directly influenced by Afro-American folktales. Like George Eliot she has a rare gift for characterization. She can compel her readers to learn about themselves by experiencing through her characters, their states of mind which they would ordinarily disavow. As a result of her literary and artistic abilities and competence, Toni Morrison stands in the vanguard of contemporary writers of fiction, transcending both her racial identity and gender.

Her first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), received mixed reviews, didn't sell well, and was out of print by 1974. Critical recognition and praise for Toni Morrison grew with each novel. Her second novel Sula (1973), made both the critics and readers pay attention to her. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her third novel Song of Solomon (1977) and the Pulitzer prize for Beloved (1987). She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 for, in the words of the Swedish Academy, her "visionary force and poetic import" which give "life to an essential aspect of American reality." On October 7, 1993, Toni Morrison became the eighth woman and first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. When she learned of the honor, she said: "This is a palpable tremor of delight for me."[1]

Toni Morrison believes in the function of the novel as the medium that gives voice to the unheard, unspoken lives of the black people. Morrison wants her prose to recreate black speech, "to restore the language that black people spoke to its

original power"[2]; for her, language is the thing that black people love so much--the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. Her prose has the quality of speech; Morrison deliberately strives for this effect, to produce literature that speaks rather than reads. She hears her prose as she writes, and during the revision process she cuts phrasing which sounds literary or written rather than spoken. She rejects critics' assertions that her prose is rich; to those who say her prose is poetic, she responds that metaphors are natural in black speech. Her strong ties to her black culture and oral tradition create a rich foundation for her novels. For Morrison, “all good art has been political"[3] and the black artist has a responsibility to the black community. She aims at capturing the unknown entity that defines what makes a book 'black’ oblivious of the fact whether the people in the books are black or not. She thinks that one characteristic of black writers is a constant hunger and disturbance that never ends. Her novels are a reflection of the experiences of the black community and blacks in general. Her work suggests who survived under what circumstances and why, who were the supposed fugitives, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it. In The Salon Interview taken by Zia Jaffrey, she asserts: “I'm very much interested in how African-American literature is perceived in this country, and written about, and viewed. It's been a long, hard struggle, and there's a lot of work yet to be done.”[4]

Morrison wants readers to be a part in her novels, to be involved actively. Readers are encouraged to craft the novel with her and to help assemble meaning. She uses the model of the black preacher who requires his parishioners to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, and to accede, change or to modify. She wants readers to say the final prayer. Thus, her writing is meant as a communal experience, a sharing of passion and ideas and responses, with her holding the reader's hand during the experience. One small example of her encouraging reader participation is her not using adverbs so that the reader should recognize and feel the speaker's emotion by feeling the words.

The endeavor in this book is to scrutinize the unspoken lexis of Toni Morrison’s works and to unveil the layers of humanistic concerns that provide denotations to her words. Earlier studies on this writer have concentrated on