

## **Theme of Racism and Class Exploitation in the Novels of Toni Morrison**

KAVITA JAIN

**Abstract.** Racism and class-ism signify the traumatic conditions under which African Americans live in white America. Toni Morrison considers racial discrimination and class exploitation a primary obstacle in the lives of African-Americans. Hence the conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have been the underlying themes in the novels of Toni Morrison. Through the account of her novels, Morrison shows several ways in which slavery which was the most oppressive period in the black history has affected the identity of African-Americans.

**Keywords :** Conflict; violence; oppression; slavery; discrimination; racism; freedom.

The conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the black by the dominant whites, the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have always been the underlying theme in the novels of Toni Morrison. Through the account of her novels, Morrison shows several ways in which slavery, which was the most oppressive period in the black history, has affected the identity of African-Americans. Morrison presents a thorough spectrum of perspectives of African Americans by bluntly voicing the opinions of many characters of the race. For example, she comments on the social position of blacks in "Song of Solomon" through 'Macon Dead', "He knew as a Negro he wasn't going to get a big slice of pie."(63) Many of the characters in Morrison's novels have this same attitude that the whites of the society dominate the system, which may also link to historical happenings of the time periods in which the novels take place. In addition to feelings of inferiority, Morrison also suggests a general, bitter sentiment felt by blacks towards whites. These feelings arise from stereotypes and prejudices, and an example can be seen in *The Bluest Eye* when young Cholly Breedlove is disrupted from his first sexual encounter by two men, "There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it" (147), which proves the reputation Cholly had learned about whites. Another way racial discrimination was weaved into Morrison's novels was through concrete examples of segregation, in 'Jazz' where there were groups formed for "Coloured Boys scouts" (Jazz 58) and where "there were no high schools in the district a coloured girl could attend". (6) Obviously, racial discrimination is an issue of great importance to this author, thus she incorporates this theme into many of her writings. The paper presents the problem of freedom and equality which are denied to black people in U.S.

Racism and class-ism signify the traumatic \conditions under which African Americans live in white America. These are systems of societal and psychological oppression that have adversely affected the lives of blacks in general and African American women in particular. Black community had to face atrocities like racism and exploitation, irrespective of sex. However, black were more oppressed physically and their cause of grievances was greater. The woman in America is expected to be beautiful in an ornamental way. She did not work for a living and was 'chaste', 'pious' and married. The black woman was an absolute antithesis of this image. She was not ornamental and according to the aesthetics of the country she was not beautiful.

Racism began in America when white masters brought the African slaves in chains and used them as labourers to work on plantation farms. Very soon the black labourer ceased to exist as a human being in the white world and was reduced to a 'body'. The basic myth of racism is that white skin brings with it cultural superiority. The whites are perceived as more intelligent and virtuous than the blacks. Blackness is associated with sin, dirt and cultural inferiority. Besides racism, class exploitation is perhaps the greatest source of oppression of black in white America. It is a system, which divides society into two classes – 'Master' and 'Lames'. Hence, race and class have been inter-related in the history of black women.

Morrison considers racism as the African - American's primary obstacle. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows that a black woman who searches for her true identity feels frustrated by her blackness and yearns to be white because of the constant fear of being rejected in her surroundings. Racism pushes the central character in the novel towards the fringes of existence. The novel focuses on Intra-racial as well as inter - racial problems. The black community wants to conform to white standards of beauty. They desperately want to be accepted by the whites and this internalized racism is the root cause of the central conflict in the novel. *The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between white standards of female beauty and the mental psychological oppression of black women. The all persuasive white standard of beauty adopted by so many characters in *The Bluest Eye* leads to cruelty and destruction. Internal racism which batters the self image of the African-American female, takes its toll on the most vulnerable victim – "The African female child." Morrison shows that intra-racial violence can lead to dehumanization of an entire race and destroy the female child completely. The community's self hatred makes them look for a social outcast, someone to look down upon, so as to enhance their constantly threatened sense of worth. The novel shows how Pecola perishes in a community that is plagued by self hatred.

In *Sula* Morrison represents the theme of racism in an indirect way by describing different structures of the community between the African -Americans and the Americans and between Sula Peace and her community. Morrison shows

the racial differences in the novel by concentrating on the settings, physical locations, and type of the lands between African Americans and white Americans.

The discrimination between the blacks and whites formed different names of the Blacks where they lived – ‘Bottom’ and ‘Medallion City Golf Course’. Not only the whites racialized the Blacks in the names of the settings but also in the kind of the grounds. In addition to the community, Morrison shows Sula as the racial figure between the African American people because of her changed look, morals and actions in spite of the sameness in race between them. Sula Peace is a young African-American woman after whom the novel is named. In the first part of the text, the writer represents Sula as a single young woman, who lives normally with her community in the Bottom. However, in the second part of the novel she has a turning point after travelling ten years to the big city ‘Medallion’. She comes back as a new person who has been described by her best friend Nel as, “You (Sula) sure have changed”. Morrison writes a powerful narrative stage, which can’t tell first or second person or even who narrate it in describing Sula’s returning to the Bottom. Since she comes back to the Bottom “accompanied by a plague of robins”, her community starts to look at her as old, strange and evil. Her look and clothes has been changed completely, “Was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see”. Her clothes symbolized a new self identity as selfish and arrogant one. Thus she looks through lower eyes at the community by refusing to follow the same woman’s traditional life in her community, who marry, raise children and labour. Not only she changed her clothes, but also her values and manners. For example, she disagrees with Jude when he comes home tired and claims his wife Nel and her best friend Sula that faces the black man in his life. She declares that the blacks are “the envy of the world”. She acts like being one of the White Americans who counteracts the African- Americans. Thus the community blames Sula of anything back that happens to them.

The social life in the *Beloved* confronts the blacks in a mixed society of blacks and whites. Being a minority the Blacks live a peripheral existence silently accepting their fate, concealed and paralysed while the world of the whites is alive and moving. They appear to be hanging on the very edge of life, hungering after what is lacking, the ownership of property, the enjoyment of comforts and descent and even little attributes of beauty and charm. The sheer helpless condition of the Blacks during and after the emancipation reveals their strong sense of place too. The place where the protagonist Sethe lived, didn’t have a number then. It was a grey and white house on Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati. During slavery, most black women were not, by and large, domestics in the house; is contrary to the popular impression that they were the labourers in the field with the men.

It also meant that the women were deprived of houses, of being householders. Blacks were not allowed to possess anything, neither relationships

nor any belongings whatsoever. Slaves are considered to be subhumans, considered as property by the plantation owners and are traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. They are expected to settle down with someone and increase their owner's wealth. Thus there lies the mockery of the system evolved by the whites for keeping slaves as their property. The problem of slavery on the African - American family is also explored, as in order to protect her children from inequality Seethe desired to take drastic and deadly measures by committing a murder.

The whites' superiority through verbal or physical means result in the subjugation of the Blacks. The idea of racism emphasizes the pain and suffering of the slaves. Seethe's encounter with evil begins in sweet home and it is personified through the school teacher and his nephews. She leaves her husband Halle behind and considers him to be dead because he has failed when she is molested by the school teacher's nephews and as a husband he has failed to protect his wife from the harm around. The whites do not accept the Blacks as being part of their level of living and they think of the Blacks as subordinates. There, the reader understands both the resulting damage of the experience, and the sadistic character of the school teacher. He continues to reduce Seethe and the slaves, in general, to animals. He sees himself as a scientist while evaluating the nature of the blacks. This process of categorization divides the black and the white community further apart, as it levels black people as an inferior one. Instead of being considered as humans, they are thought of as animals that need to be observed, examined and understood.

In *Song of Solomon* the theme of racism permeates in many ways, both implicitly and explicitly. Not only is social tension thick due to the setting of *Song of Solomon*, but it also plays a large part in moving the plot along. Milkman's grandfather Solomon flew away from his life because of slavery, and Guitar's grandfather died because of his white employees. While it seems as if everyone in the novel is trying to place the grip of their families past as slaves, in reality, they are only further enslaving themselves. For example, Macon Dead tells Milkman that if he was to be free, he must have money, and lots of it, so that he can own people, which is a direct reversal of his own past, yet it traps Macon in a position where he is enslaved to his job.

In *Paradise*, Morrison's first novel since winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, she has produced a story sure to generate volumes of permanent appraisal. *Paradise* examines the residual effects of racism on the relationships among Blacks, rather than between Blacks and Whites, the book bursts open with the first shot of a grisly assault on a woman's commune by the leading citizens of the isolated town of Ruby, Okla. Between that attack, set in 1976, and the book's conclusion just a few weeks later, Morrison stirs the long history of this mythical all black community like a witch's few. Racism serves as the fluid in which all the events take place, working values and stirring the paranoia that eventually encourages

complicated men to murder the women they believe responsible for their town's decay.

Thus Morrison tries to locate post colonial black identity in the socio- political ground where cultures are hybridized, powers are negotiated and individual are reproduced as resistant agents. On the other hand, just 'being black' in her novels does not promote unity within the community as there also exist radicalization and class differences within the black collective. So through her character Morrison portrays the dehumanization of slavery and racism. In short Morrison helps the world to stop and think about the history of the struggles through African American experience. She portrays the black community with reference to blackness and the inner struggles of the individuals. So each of her works, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008) provide insights into the complexity of black community. She not only writes about claiming the superiority by the whites, she is also concerned about the internal racism among the race itself. Morrison analyses how black race is treated like animals during that time in her novel.

**Kavita Jain**

Research Scholar, Dept. of English  
Magadh University Bodh-Gaya

**Works Cited**

Morrison, Toni. 2004. *Sula*. New York : First Vintage International.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 1977. *Song of Solomon*. United States : Alfred Knopf.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 1970. *The Bluest Eye*. United States : Holt, Rinehart and Winston.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *Jazz*. United States : Alfred Knopf.