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## FEMINISM, RACISM AND SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study the concepts of feminism, racism and slavery in Toni Morrison's novels. Morrison deals with many social themes such as black people oppression in white societies, identity, violence, slavery, sexism. These issues play a vital role in the lives of people particularly black people. Oppression has many reasons in these societies such as skin color and women. Black people are victims of the dominant white societies. White people practice violence against black people in many ways. Black women struggle hard to find their identity among racist societies. Accordingly, Morrison's works cover all these concepts practiced against her people and deals with each in a very distinctive way.

**Keywords:** *racism, sexism, slavery, violence, oppression, trauma*

المساواة و العنصرية و العبودية في روايات توني موريسون

المستخلص – ان الغرض من هذا البحث هو دراسة مفاهيم المساواة و العنصرية و العبودية في روايات الكاتبة توني موريسون. تعاملت الكاتبة مع العديد من الموضوعات منها اضطهاد السود من قبل مجتمعات البيض، الهوية، العنف، العبودية و الجنس . تلعب هذه القضايا دورا حيويا في حياة الناس و خصوصا السود. للاضطهاد اسباب عديدة في هذه المجتمعات منها الاضطهاد بسبب لون البشرة او الاضطهاد ضد المرأة. ان السود هم ضحايا في مجتمع البيض حيث مارس البيض العنف ضد السود بشتى الوسائل. تسعى النساء ذوات البشرة السمراء لايجاد هويتها في المجتمعات العنصرية. و عليه، استعرضت الكاتبة موريسون في اعمالها جميع هذه المفاهيم الممارسة ضد بني جنسها و تعاملت مع كل مفهوم بطريقة مميزة.

## INTRODUCTION

Sayce (1957: 119) suggests that readers are aware of literary features that embedded in literary language such as the plot, the style, the author's personality and the characters. The observation of words doesn't mean to avoid the aesthetic features of the literary text but to promote the aesthetic taste

(Spitzer, 1948: 27). Many language components in fiction such as the dialogue, the characterization and the plot are created by language instruments.

The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century witnesses the rise of new developments of women in different societies. Ethnicity plays an essential role in the life of societies and especially

women. Women from different ethnicities live in a different way. They try their best to be good mothers and preserve their role as mothers and wives at the same time.

Literature is a social phenomenon. Wellek and Warren (1949: 89) states that literary work is a social foundation. The close relationship between society and literature pave the way for its development and flourishing. Thus, the reader of literary works has a full knowledge of history and as a result will talk about the political, social and economic system in a specific society. They focus on the significant contribution of society and its interaction with literature. Simmel (1906: 330) clarifies that there is a concept of secrecy in every relationship between two people or groups even if one of the members doesn't notice. This statement shows the struggle of black people within slavery system of white society and the writer tries to prove that this conflict had an impact on the social life of black people.

Simmel (1906: 70) states that social conflict is responsible for the total change of groups and social ties. He (Ibid: 34) adds that conflict breaks the social ties and creates obstacles and boundaries between social groups by making them aware of the concept of separateness between them. Accordingly, Coser (1976: 181) suggests that the social conflict has certain function.

Within social group, it will help to create unity through the promotion of the idea of threatening by the outsiders. Simmel tries to clarify many ideas such as criticism, are and woman's right. He adds that this conflict has an effect on social groups not only negative impact but positive.

Toni Morrison deals with many aspects which are regarded as the aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as sexuality, oppression, and gender which can be linked to the ideology of the society. Griffith (2006: 179) argues that the cultural studies prevail in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century focus on the sympathy for the oppressed people in which she calls "marginalized". She makes a relation between black people within white American society and black people within black societies. Griffith (Ibid: 180-181) states that powerful entities can be rich people, males, white individuals and politicians. Within the society in which these entities are active, one can notice some ethnicities are oppressed and marginalized and subject to extortion. Raynor and Butler (2007: 177) say that Toni Morrison unmute voiceless people especially those who are forgotten and subject to oppression and discrimination. They argue that Toni Morrison, through her writings, forces the reader to imagine scenes and figure out the meaning as she depicts power as a wrecking ball which destroy people through injustice. Barker

(2000:283-284) clarifies the injustice between men and women saying that males are the natural dominants in the societies and at the top of the hierarchical system while women are at the bottom of this hierarchical system and seen as child nurturing and neglected creature.

The mission of the novelist is not only important but crucial. This mission is not only instructive but decisive. It is not only for reading only but it shapes the whole world's knowledge on things that we don't know. Accordingly, Toni Morrison breaks the line between the aesthetic and artistic features of literature and social criticism by creating her own place of literary criticism to spread her voice (McBride, 2007: 163). Wall (2007: 139) claims that in her work, Morrison succeeded to depict two decades of the history of the Afro-American literature.

### **POSTFEMINISM MOVEMENT**

The movement of Postfeminism has emerged in France since 1968. Feminist movements have passed through series of waves. The first wave was initiated in 1792 – 1960. This wave focuses on the elimination of racism against women. The second wave is initiated in 1960 – 1980 as a response to the disappointment of women on the racism practice against them. The last wave is, so-called

Postfeminism, emerges as a reaction to the universality of feminist issues.

Genz and Brabon (2009: 1) state that Postfeminism appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in many contexts such as media, politics academic and social. Gill and Scharf (2011: 68) suggest that in cultural context, the best representative of Postfeminism movement is the character of Michelle Obama the wife of the US president Barack Obama. In academic context, Postfeminism refers to the awareness of the distinction between gender and identity. Brooks (1997: 99) argues that Postfeminism movement shifts from identifying the oppression and discrimination practice against women to the ways of understanding the concept of feminism.

Coppock, Hayden and Richter (1995: 7) suggest that Postfeminism seeks to make people aware of women's lives and the feeling of being ignored. Accordingly, Postfeminism is a reaction against the political challenges facing women after the second feminist wave and this is reflected in the feminist writings.

Brooks (1997: 98) suggests that the beginning of 1980 and till the end of 1990 witnesses the flourishing of feminism as the center of critical researches. She assures that the gap between the second

feminist wave and the third wave (Postfeminism) is bridged by focusing on the theory of feminism. Accordingly, woman's identity and history cannot be separated.

Warren (2011: 2) argues that Afro-American literature distinguishes how African authors, unconsciously or consciously, depicts rhetoric, traditions, folklore and myths elicit from black people's society. The other trend suggests that Afro-American literature can be distinguished by its involvement with the system of slavery and exploitation practice against black people in the western societies.

Sumana (1998: 62) argues that the systems of racism and sexism are a result of psychological and societal constraints which impose on the lives of African women. These two aspects (race and sex) have been interwoven. It is not surprising to see and African novelist write to show the relationship between them. The display of sexuality and sexual discrimination is the result of the inner and outer clash within American society.

### **SLAVERY SYSTEM IN WHITE SOCIETY**

Slavery is one of the problems that has impact on women's life in society. Collins (2000: 5) reveals that African women are

brought to the United States of America to be slaves. It leads to a negative behavior so-called oppression. This type of oppression on African women leads to lose identity and they become less feminine. There are two aspects that make things worse for African women: slavery and separation. African women work as slaves and without salaries. In addition, they are forbidden from working in household chores (Collins, Ibid: 47). African women become less feminine as they work out in homes and separated from their children.

Brooks (1997: 100) suggests that the works of Toni Morrison are mainly characterized by studying inner feelings and lives of women. She is interested in studying women's world that they live in with racism, sexism and slavery. Toni Morrison refers to the inner feelings and emotions of women as inner destruction. This doesn't mean physical destruction or committing a suicide but emotional destruction.

People are affected by the norms and gender preference of the society imposed on them. These conventions are rooted in the minds of the society. The most of Morrison's novels, sexuality is the main theme. In her writings, she looks for sub-themes of sexuality such as race, class, love, and oppression. The term gender is ambiguous. Gender is connected to

feminism. Feminism focuses on three concepts: the politics and relations of gender and sexuality.

In the white American culture, feminism and slavery are examined in the biased society. In her novel “*Sula*”, Morrison used female characters to represent independent females. Sula represents the dominant female who live her life freely. She rejects the idea of getting married and take the responsibilities. In the novel “*Beloved*”, the female character represents the slave woman who brutally treated and raped. The character suffers a lot and escaped her work. Then, she decided to kill her daughter so-called Beloved.

Both novels depict the hardship in the characters’ lives. Hamilton (1994: 109-127) shows the domination of white community through Morrison’s characters by the prevailing of white people traditions. Showalter (1977: 13) describes the three stages of female cultures:

“Imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles”.

Pereira (1997: 24) shows that the later writings of Morrison she frees herself from the ideology of white people and starts to address black people history. The main theme that Toni Morrison focuses on is

that the search for black people identity. This idea is supported by Byerman (1993: 100) who says that Morrison concentrates on the pain and soreness of domination of white societies over black rather than any other negative aspects. In addition, all her characters in the novels remain under the domination of white and still resist. In her novel “*The Bluest Eye*” Morrison depicts the world of African – American world which is dominated by white people ideology. In “*Tar Baby*”, Morrison’s character was obsessed by white people model of beauty and at the end this obsession threatens the identity of black people (Hamilton, 1994: 74). Baillie (2003: 35) suggests that “Morrison was later to regret this representation of Pecola as a pitiful victim, and in her subsequent novels marginal existence no longer preludes choice and will”.

McCarthy (1995: 377) argues that Toni Morrison, in her novel “*The Blue Eye*” in 1970, shifts from the music of blue to jazz music. It indicates that Morrison wants to show that the shift is to reveal the dominant music of white people which is jazz. She wants to deliver a message that black people’s identity is in danger. In addition, for aesthetic purposes which means that jazz is aesthetic and has powerful and beautiful rhythms that blues.

## MORRISON'S CONCEPT OF TRAUMA

The term Trauma is very useful to understand the sufferings of black people in the society dominated by white people. Violence is the essential reason of trauma. Violence is used to cause damage to the body and as a result will have an impact on the mind. Caruth (1996 :3) argues that focuses on violence that not only affects the body but the mind as well. Accordingly, the violence against the mind is more crucial and deeper than on the body. The distinction between body and mind is that people always share their ideas and thoughts but not their bodily injuries.

Caruth (Ibid: 494) justifies that people who succeed to survive traumatic event will live this trauma twice. First, the scars that the event cause and second, nightmares that the event left in the mind of the person. The second reason is more influential as it haunts the mind of the person and makes him/her live in a painful inner conflict.

Identity and trauma have a significant relation because identity comprises both the mind and the body. Hall (1997: 225) clarifies that: “the ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of

representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization”. He argues that some cultural features have participated in the formation of black people’s identities among them; traumatic experiences, memories and hidden history. Consequently, narrative aspects and social movements play a vital role in the depiction of the past. He suggests that one can repair his/her past and rebuild the broken bridge between the past and present.

In her book “Trauma Narratives and the Remarking of the Self”, Brison (1999: 40) “a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self”. She defines the narrative trauma as the method of reporting painful memories and trying to help the survivor to gather and find his/her identity. She suggests that there are a couple of obstacles that stand in the way of retrieving one’s identity. Firstly, their narrative language is very weak to show their grief and, secondly, no listeners for black people’s voices in predominant white societies. The recovery is neither therapeutic nor inner but it is mainly attached to the recovery of the society and the ideologies of white toward black people.

## RACISM AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Racism is defined as the discrimination of a group of people according to their race, belief, color of their skin, customs ... etc. This term has been attached black and white people. Edouard and Faucher (2005: 1208) suggests "Social constructionists propose that the concept of race, they believe that a classification is based on skin color and other skin-deep properties, such as body shape or hair style maps onto meaningful, and important biological kinds". Racism is active in the societies dominated by white people. In the past, anti-slavery movements free slaves and i.e., black people get their freedom after amendments conducted by the USA government. But for the novelists, things are different. Toni Morrison depicts the life of black people by many black characters. She reveals the humiliation, inhumanities and the system of slaves practice against black people at that time (Nirupama and Laishram, 2016:212).

In the predominated white people cultures, white people are connected to purity, goodness and virtue while black people are connected to darkness that implies evil (Delago and Stefancic, 2001: 75). Accordingly, black people start to consider themselves as bad. In spite of the amendments the USA government has done, racist actions still active. Plous and

Williams (1995: 795) state that "The bad news is that racial stereotypes from the days of slavery are still present in American society, even among the young, and even among African Americans" Toni Morrison tries to reveal the contribution of the system of slavery in the American society to the social life of black people. She tries to analyze the impact of such activities on the black people identity. She wants to depict how black people were seen by white people. She achieves this by creating certain characters to act out such activities.

In her novel "Beloved", she shows how white people mock black people. She depicts Beloved as killed by her mother. This is because her mother wants to save her from the slavery system practice against them at that time. Her mother wants to save her from the brutality of white people who want to prevent them from escaping their slavery system.

In her novel "Song of Solomon" Morrison clarifies the position of black people in the society.

*"He know as a Negro he wasn't going to get a big slice of pie" (p: 63).*

Morrison's characters in most of her novels have an attitude towards the society of white people who dominate the social system. Moreover, the concept of



inferiority which haunts the mind of black people drives Morrison to describe the bitter feelings of blacks toward whites. This example is in her novel “The Bluest Eye”

The other concept that Toni Morrison sheds lights on is sexism. In her novel “Song of Solomon” there are some examples of differences between men and women as follows:

The novel starts to identify the main characters:

Powell (1990: 749) argues that these two characters Dick and Jane are the symbol of typical racism in the white societies and how the traditions and values of white people interwoven in the American societies. Pecola and Pauline declination is of two reasons: firstly, their devastation is based on the values and traditions imposed on them. Those people live in a society that consider them less than second level citizens. Secondly, they don't believe in themselves. The outer influence and inner weakness lead to their devastation.

Griffith (2006: 175) says that Morrison moves to describe the aggressive old days of the main character's father and mother and it ends with father's sexual assault against his daughter. Then she goes on describing the violence and oppression practiced by white people against blacks.

The violence is arising by the hatred white people hide inside towards black people and this hatred is translated by the victimization of Pecola. The main character (Pecola) is not only the victim of her father and mother but the society as well. The oppression reveals the entire frustration and humiliation the character subjects to.

In “Sula” the violence is more obvious. This novel depicts the slow devastation of society from the bottom. For some critics, the concepts of humiliation and oppression are the core and the main cause of violence. The lack of political power and economic ability of black people make them expose to violence, oppression, extortion and racism.

Pereira (1997: 82) argues that in “Tar Baby” novel, Morrison deals with other social aspects such as children abuse and psychological torture. In this novel, violence still exists but in a different way. Morrison depicts the inhuman act of wife “Jadine” against her child. She is guilty for torturing her son psychologically and physically. The novel comes closer to the source of discrimination and violence but leave the reader without any solutions.

In “Beloved”, Toni Morrison comes to a conclusion that racism and violence result from the acts of oppression. Morrison

shifts from the identifying the source of violence in white societies to the act of oppression practice against black people. Morrison tries to depict that society builds on respect and love and tears apart by the acts of racism and envy. Violence is rooted in the society in many sides such as physical abuse, whipping and murders. Sethe kills her daughter as she is afraid to be a slave like her mother. Morrison gives a solution to this kind of violence and racism that black people can survive through their adherence to their traditions and values. Morrison succeeds to personify the needs of black people and society. Accordingly, the novel represents not only the inner struggle but society struggle for unity and cohesion. Morrison wants to say that life is cruel but together one can share love and experience in order to survive.

Barker (2000: 289) states that “Since gender is a cultural construct, it is said to be malleable in a way that biology may not be”. Accordingly, gender and racism play a vital role in the two novels “Sula” and “Beloved” in defining the women status. The oppression practice against women are multifaceted. The oppression is due to the act of slavery that steals their identity as mothers and women as well. Women struggle and suffer a lot under the system of slavery in order to continue doing their role as wives and mothers. Women treated with inferiority within white societies.

Black women struggle to retrieve their rights and appreciate black societies. In the novel “The Bluest Eye”, Morrison uses flashback which is different style from “Sula”. Every chapter in her novels tell certain events take place within certain year. The narrative strategy in Toni Morrison’s novels is based on telling the story in a psycho-analytical way.

### CONCLUSION

In reading Toni Morrison’s novels, one can prove number of themes embedded within each novel such as racism, feminism, slavery and sexism. Morrison successfully bonds these aspects in the plot of her novels in an easy and intelligent way to make the reader aware of the message and the lesson about society. Absolutely, these themes can link people’s lives and reflect their reality and as a result, they reflect her strong and interwoven writings.

These novels demonstrate the role of patriarchal, racist and sexist community in the life of black people. Toni Morrison regards these aspects as social construct. Accordingly, the sexist and racist roles of characters represents the social realities of white societies. These novels reflect the oppression and slavery practice against black people. Morrison illustrates black children who are deprived from their mothers as part of racism and oppression

against black women. Morrison continues to discover issues that American society suffers from. She doesn't only talk about the oppressed by the oppressor as well. She portrays the sick society and its role in creating sick people.

In her novels, there is a criticism towards unhealthy parents and the lack of good black fathers in black societies. Sick parent who are sexually motivated and lack of love toward their children. This type of

degradation leads to the declination of young generation. In addition, Morrison succeeds to clarify that there are victims in gendered societies. She directs the reader towards odd and unhealthy behaviors in modern societies. Through her novels, Morrison tries to guide reader how to treat and behave our children because they are the result of our behavior.

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