

A Study of Critical Reception of Toni Morrison on Feminism

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Abstract – Feminism has political and cultural connotations. Different waves of feminism over the centuries have endeavoured to liberate women and to carve a place for women in society. Several novelists, especially the novelists of New Literatures portray the realistic picture of women. Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize winner of first black woman not only reached the peak of literary veneration, but also wrote thematically arresting and emotionally moving novels. The Bluest Eye (1970) the first novel remains one of the best. Being a multi-faceted woman, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, Beloved. The author of this article traverses through her novels. The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987) Love (2003) and A Mercy (2008) to explore how Toni Morrison depicted feminism. The novelist plays the role of ethnic cultural feminist and tries to alleviate prejudices and misconceptions and seeks ways to reinforce the value that racism and sexism would take away from the beauty, the work and the cultural values of black women.

Keywords: Feminism, Women, Society, Toni Morrison, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Jessica Harris, writing in *Essence* (September 1977) sees *Song of Solomon* as "vaster in terms of time, locales and sustained character development." Harris seems to be saying that *Song of Solomon* is evidence of Morrison's growth in mastering the craftsmanship of novel writing. However, Harris hints that Toni Morrison has yet to develop satisfactorily as a novelist. She observes that Morrison is talented, but she also tells her readers of the "promise of what that talent will become." Harris, who also reviewed *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* for *Essence*, was less enthusiastic about *Song of Solomon*. *Essence's* targeted readers are black women. As Mootry points out in the *Chicago Tribune Book World* (September 11, 1977), *Song of Solomon* is not a "woman-centered" novel, as the two previous novels are. One can conclude that *Essence* and its readers are interested in black feminist issues. Harris does note, however, that Morrison is a "master storyteller." She concludes that the novel is flawed, but she does not explain how it is flawed. Nonetheless, she says that the book deserves to be read.

The later scholarly discourses on *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are published in such publications as *Black American Literature Forum*, *College Language Association Journal*, and even *Names: Journal of the American Name Society*. The earlier two novels are

also discussed in two books-- *Sturdy Black Bridges* (1979), by Roseann Bell, Bettye Parker and Beverly Sheftall, and *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976* by Barbara Christian. The analysis by Barbara is by far more penetrating. In this large volume, Christian devotes an entire chapter to Toni Morrison. Christian entitles her chapter five "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison." In this long chapter, Christian explains how Morrison is writing in the Afro-American tradition. However, Christian's main focus in the book is on the Afro-American women-novelistic tradition. In doing so, Christian sees the two novels as feminist literature. Christian writes:

Both novels chronicle the search for beauty amidst the restrictions of life, both from within and without. In both novels, the black woman, as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured. Often they find that there is conflict between their own nature and the society that man has made, to the extent that one seems to be an inversion of the other.

Toni Morrison's third novel won her the very prestigious National Book Critics' Award for fiction in 1977. This award and subsequent critical

acclaim, coupled with the financial success of *Song of Solomon*, made Morrison a premier contemporary American writer. Compared to the criticism of Morrison's prior two books, the volume of criticism of *Song of Solomon* was very high. The criticism appeared in popular periodicals, academic journals, dissertations and books. Generally, the critical assessments of the novel can be placed in three categories--Euro- American, Afro-American and feminist. The Euro-American critical perspective tends to focus on the classical elements of the novel; the Afro-American perspective tends to include classical elements, but focuses on black awareness; and the feminist perspective tends to include classical elements and/ or black awareness, but focuses on the problems of black feminine socialization.

Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, edited by Shari Benstock; *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean and the United States*, by Bonnie J. Barthold; *Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction and James Joyce*, by Craig Hansen Weiner; *Terrorists and Novelists*, by Diane Johnson; *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women in the Novel in Contemporary Experiences*, by Joan s. Frye; *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*, edited by Bruck and Kaner; *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, edited by Pryse and Spillers; and *The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism*, by Jones and Vinson.

By 1984, it becomes apparent that *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are clearly classified as feminist novels. The classification had been made many years earlier in the 1970's, but no1the evidence is more substantial. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are almost always included in books whose primary focus is feminist literature, particularly black feminist literature. To include these novels in books suggests a more permanent and widely accepted classification. Some of the books that focus on feminine literature, which also discussed *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, are *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*, *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* and *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

In sum, the criticism reveals that in *Tar Baby* Morrison broadened her perspective significantly by including and commenting on white characters for the first time. In addition, the fact that books and chapters in books are being devoted to Morrison and her works mean that *Tar Baby* and the previous novels are perceived as important contributions to American letters. In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison is able to handle five significant but difficult writing techniques at once, which makes her novel so appealing to different kinds of readers.

First, Morrison's approach to her subject is unique in that her protest, while vigorous, is extremely subtle. There is little or no preaching in *Tar Baby*. Morrison is almost as objective as a writer can be. Secondly, Morrison shows great skill at the art of characterization. Both Jadine and Son are virtually fully developed characters. Thirdly, Morrison is able to espouse feminist issues without becoming obsessive or arrogant. Fourthly, Morrison is able to use the language with precision. Then, Morrison is able to comment on white society and black society, even when it appears that she is commenting on neither.

When *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel, was published in 1970, the author was virtually unknown as a writer and only a relatively few critics responded to the novel. Most significant are early positive reviews in the influential *New York Times Book Review* and the widely circulated *Newsweek* magazine. Without this very early exposure to a large general audience and to other critics, Morrison might have gone relatively unknown for several decades and many novels later, as is the case with some writers. *Sula*, the second novel by Morrison, was also critically acclaimed and, by a larger and more varied group of critics. In addition to the mainstream critics and the Afro-American critics, feminist critics begin to point out feminist issues in both of the novels. It is at this point that three distinctly different schools of criticism emerge. The criticism is now categorized as Euro-American, Afro-American and feminist. The critics in each category become more numerous and are consequently more clearly discernable as they respond to Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*. This novel, along with the previous two, earns Morrison enough respect to be labeled as "an American writer." This respect is manifested in the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award, which was awarded for *Song of Solomon* in 1977. *Tar Baby*, Morrison's fourth novel, solidifies Morrison's earned respect.

Some feminist critics included in their discussions the Euro American values espoused by Morrison and "shared experiences" of Afro-Americans. But the primary concern of these critics is Morrison's decrying of the thwarting of the personhood of women in American society. Some feminist critics feel that Morrison is concerned basically about black women, while others feel that she is concerned about all women. Without fail, the feminist critics discuss the almost superhuman strength of Morrison's women in their attempts to survive, as well as in their relationships with other women, children and even with men. Basically, the feminist critics respond to the rare, but abundant in Morrison's novels, positive images of women in literature.

This study contends that Toni Morrison's novels draw on three convergent literary traditions for

ideas, meanings and structures. Consequently, as the critics respond to the novels, a pattern of criticism emerges from each tradition. The critical responses to the novels can be placed within three schools of criticism--those responses arising from Euro-Americans, those arising from Afro-Americans, and those arising from feminists drawn from both groups. Each school of criticism reflects a structure of beliefs and values which transcend literary judgments. Each critic's response grows naturally out of his respective tradition. Consequently, this study can be placed within the significantly large body of literature which suggests the sociological nature of criticism.

Inevitably, each critic's response to the novels must be founded (consciously or unconsciously) on an ideology that provides a structure of beliefs and values which transcend specifically literary judgments. Consequently, the first question is: can the varied analyses of Morrison's novels be perceived as ideological discourse responding to the conscious or unconscious perceptions and values which the critics find in the novels themselves? Secondly, is Toni's Morrison's critical acclaim the result of the novelist's ability to appeal to three distinct ideologies current in the 1970's and the 1980's? That is, can the critical reception be categorized as Afro American, Euro-American, or feminist? Like other contemporary Afro American writers, Toni

Morrison's writings seem to emerge out of these three distinctly different, but demonstrably related, American literary traditions. While Morrison's novels are different in many ways, they are also bound to the ideas and concepts of a long line of Afro American writers that extends back to the slave narratives. However, the Afro-American literary tradition is embedded in the Euro-American literary tradition. Also, there is the more recent, but still very important, feminist tradition in American literature. Obviously, both men and women also write in the traditions.

A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN AND AMERICAN FICTION:

The scan for an autonomous, incorporated personality has been the leitmotif in progress of African-American essayists. This journey is yearning for a home and wholeness and is demonstrative of an intense want of black community for self-ID and self-actualization.

In the community and also in the field of writing, black women stay unidentified as wise, smart, splendid, receptive, or more all imaginative. To add to the most noticeably bad, because of the overwhelming effect of bigotry and sexism, the general public even declined to acknowledge them as people. As black individuals, they were not

perceived by the white. As women additionally they needed to confront antagonistic vibe from black men. Gerda Lerner keeps up:

"Belonging as they do to two groups, which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society-Blacks and Women-they have been doubly invisible. Their records he buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted" (Black Women in white America xvii-xviii).

The white male journalists have constantly depicted black women in their books as one of these generalizations. The whites as well as the black scholars have received this generalization depiction of black women however the black male authors demonstrate somewhat more understanding and thought for the black women. The white male essayists pen-picture black women as solid, adjustable and empowering mammies though the black male journalists depict the black women as grievous mulattoes. Black authors like Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison outlined the black women as mammas or sex cats. Be that as it may, an alternate picture of black women has been given by authors like Imamu Baraka and Wear Lee. They have worshipped black women like mother.

Elaine Showalter considers the requirement for women to build for them a strong establishment that will slight the male hypothesis. Male authors and commentators in 1970 guaranteed that the women's activist essayists did not have a strong ground for their reality, which made them subject to male pundits. The debate among women has cornered the women experience to an exceptionally immaterial, domain and has lost the confidence of a large portion of the cream feminists who have misjudged reality and have possessed an insightful domain. Showalter is of the conclusion that women should participate in the scholarly community to consign the male-situated perspectives and to achieve a common and shared connection amongst people. While the white feminists are associated with straggling to advance a specialty in the scholarly region, which will conflict with the male-situated scholarly community, black women require an approach to make tracks in an opposite direction from anticipated oppression. White women are more worried about their expert professions while black women need to straggle for their reality in the general public and have little possibilities for scholarly vocations. White feminists as well as black feminists have given themselves to scholarly worries without considering the situation of those women who are squeezed with the battle for everyday survival. Feminists, along these lines, require a hypothesis, which mirrors the interests of black regular workers women and to assist them with being free from racial, social and sexual mistreatments. It is

through holding that women can have an offer of their cognizance about the yearning of women and will figure out how to oppose male centric society. That is the reason Michele Wallace declares her view that keeping in mind the end goal to ascend against sexism all women must be related with each other. In any case, for the presence of women it is important to build up the requirement for sisterhood, which will produce the route toward a solid, healthy future for women. The distinctions among women ought to be pulling out for landing at an answer for the difficulty and issues of women. Every lady should advance her own thoughts. At the point when all women will join their thoughts implied for regular great, they will arrive at the finish of the journey and each will know how to live, as well as how to dream of a more important life. In the event that the white feminists expand their comprehension by building up their sensitivity to regular workers women, they will contribute an extraordinary arrangement to advance a familiarity with women generalization. In any case, Lynet Uttal recalling her experience of managing white feminists calls attention to that the white women's activist's commitment to speculate an extensive women talk does not really mean anything empowering. The demonstration of the white feminists in dismissing their duty regarding creating women holding and self-governance undermines the situation of the women who are cornered to the outskirts. The distinction between the different gatherings of women ought to be dealt with by the by, pass on development will be a disappointment and debilitate the reason for women solidarity which will be a brilliant open door for the patriarchal oppressors.

It is basic for black women commentators to define a far reaching womanist hypothesis that regards both the voice of white feminists with respect to their scholarly vocation and furthermore the voice of the black women who require a hypothesis keeping in mind the end goal to escape from expected persecutions. A few faultfinders propose that African-American women should develop a customary hypothesis, which will fill in as another option toward the western thought of hypothesis in light of paired restriction. Be that as it may, the women's activist development does not make much expectation in the psyches of black women in America since they fear losing what they have accomplished because of this framework. The idea of women's activist battle has been received by a couple of black women scholars. The black women need to straggle for presence in two conflicting universes at the same time, one white, special, and severe and the other black, abused, and mistreated. Different reasons have influenced the black women essayists to depict their women characters such that they will make themselves free from estrangement emerging out of prejudice, style and sexism. Ogunyemi in her meaning of Womanism notices:

Black American women writers share with black males the heritage of the blues, whose spiritual dynamics ensure equilibrium in a turbulent world—perhaps because, as Stephen Henderson points out, there is a connection between the blues and the capacity to experience hope. The blues have had a tremendous impact on the Afro-American womanist novel, and in contrast to feminist novels, most Afro-American womanist novels, culture-oriented as they are; abound in hope (Signs 89).

MORRISON'S NOVELS: THE SELF-ASSERTING WOMEN:

The continual quest for, and once in a while affirmation of an impartial, incorporated identity within a sphere that can be known as one's personal has been the leitmotif in writings by way of afro-individuals each past and present. This look for what James Baldwin's hero in *Pass* inform it on the mountain, John Grimes, calls 'another existence', and what one acknowledges as a yearning for a 'home' and 'wholeness'—the two needs so crucial to the human spirit and so completely denied to the blacks in the US. It's far like Ralph Ellison's hero in *Invisible Man*, whose relentless effort is directed at not merely the particular but the customary, indicative of the craving of the black community as a whole. Beneath the 'double jeopardy' of racism and sexism, black girls in the USA have often been unrecognizable as people. Commenting in this, Gerda Lerner observes:

Belonging as they do to two groups, which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society—Blacks and women—they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted (Black Women in White America xvii-xviii).

Denied individuality in American countrywide mythology, the black women were entrapped in an intricate net of misconceptions and stereotypes that defines black girls in variegated roles and simultaneously, creates the monolithic 'black woman'.

A radical analysis of fictions written by using black girls writers, we are able to discover that their resources of literature goes back to times immemorial. Due to the fact that intercourse and race were so interrelated* it isn't surprising that once black women novelist have posted novels, they've necessarily reflected that courting. Due to the impact of racism and sexism, the works of the black woman were studied by way of literary critics in phrases in their history and expression as black and women. From 1945 till nowadays they were suffering for asserting the rights of women through their literary works. Their writings mirror the coincidence in their delivery being a woman and a black. It isn't that they write about black humans or

for black readers but they are closest to their hearts. Their view of existence courses them to look at minutely what white humans, especially guys folk rarely see. Their view of the circle of relatives, society, community and the world are projected via the eyes of women characters in particular black. Being well privy to the effect of racism and sexism, which harass the womenfolk, irrespective of race, they open up the significant a part of social contradictions and difficult situations, which reason hassle to girls.

Absolute confidence the black girls writers gift a diffusion of topics of their novels, however their principal goal is to painting the plight of lady characters, who're sufferers of capitalism, racism and sexism. The battle of those woman characters is to say their rights and obtain wholeness no matter the effect of racism and sexism upon them. It isn't sudden that black girl writers like alice walker, nella Larsen, Zora Neale huaston, Redmond fauset and toni morrison have always reflected that courting.

Black women suffer closely at the fingers of each black and white men in alice walker's novels. Some of our girls characters like mem and margarate come to be sufferers of such cruel bodily and mental torture via adult males. They perish ultimately of the radical. Thus alice walker makes an strive to expose through her characters that girl submission is destined to be self-adverse. She portrays violence in her novels to explore and illustrate the degree of melancholy, that's due to the unfulfilled longings and aspirations of her girls characters. In her novel, the 0.33 lifestyles of grange copeland (1976), walker makes an try to painting before us the terrible elements of the sharecropping machine, a machine which places the tenant fanners into a sense of despair and motivates them to strike out at their close to and Close ones, an useless strive of violent behavior directed against the proprietor of the land. The illegal practices observed within the sharecropping machine become the reason for extreme suffering for the black households, which motive them to sense estranged from their work. In meridian (1979), walker depicts how the heroine of the unconventional, meridian undergoes a physical and mental warfare in her attempt to deal with the complex allegiances required of any individual to be involved in innovative movement. The life of the people involved within the civil rights motion of the 1960s and the political violence there upon were superbly handled by walker in this novel. Walker has talked about how the effect of the social situations like lack of knowledge at the part of their mother and a number of her friends has made the heroine of the radical go through a lot.

When meridian's paralysis and numbness movements her to transcendental bliss, she is unable to make physical use of her frame. It's far her ability to place herself returned into her very own body proves her as- a winner. As a mother, spouse, lover,

daughter and pal, she undergoes her sufferings and finds her conventional roles any such limited and disenchanting one which she gives up all earthly pleasures and accepts the incredible freedom of an ascetic life. At the time of her parting when Truman tells her, "i hate to consider you constantly alone" (Meridian 220), her response proves her non secular power: "however this is my value... Besides, all of the humans Who are as by myself as i am will someday collect on the river. We can watch the nighttime solar pass down. And inside the blackness can be we will understand the truth" (220). It's miles her relationship with the humans and society that makes her a winning lady. She isn't always disconnected from however rather connected with the humans and the social process in her decision to paintings for the liberation of the humans.

CONCLUSION:

Morrison has made a noteworthy appraisal by investigating, uncovering and rethinking the situation of ladies in the socio-chronicled, political and monetary setting, featuring her inert power and ability. She firmly demonstrates her lack of regard to man centric culture which sustains distracted thought of ladies being synonymous with womb, bust and hips. Morrison's treatment is unique in relation to others since she is focused on the dark ladies' involvement. The significance of women's liberation has been reflected in the imaginative works of Morrison. The topics of affection, marriage and sex have been managed a feeling of trustworthiness remembering the different parts of social and social subtleties. The impacts of subjugation of dark ladies empowered Toni Morrison to seek after the outcomes of the devastation of the mother-kid bond on women personality. Morrison has shown productive richness in delineating the perplexing complexities of the instinctual and passionate reactions of the ladies characters in her books, particularly the mental checking of those ladies who assumed the part of moms in different circumstances under intimidation of the current conditions. An imaginative work of value is constantly trailed by the surge of feedback, so loads of pundits have just risen with their great arrangement of feedback in regards to the inventive works and vision of Morrison. The scholarly ability and expository capacity of present day man is ascending ever more elevated with the speeding pace of the electronic progression; consequently, it appears to be likely that future age may locate some significant elucidations of Morrison's work. Be that as it may, on one point they would all need to concur that the philosophical quintessence of her books depends on an affection, and acknowledgment, and a grasp of the entire dark network paying little mind to the person's close to home, social, moral and political logic.

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