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Analysing Feminism Literary Critique of Toni Morrison Novels

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Abstract - Toni Morrison's books reveal a complex web of themes, characters, and storylines when analysed through the lens of literary analysis and feminism. Morrison, who won the Nobel Prize in literature, uses her skill as a storyteller to explore gender, ethnicity, and identity in all their complexity. Through a feminist perspective, this research deconstructs Morrison's works, revealing the complex depiction of women, their agency, the the socio-cultural influences on their lives. These works, ranging from "The Bluest Eye" to "Beloved," provide a rich environment for exploring feminist ideology, questioning societal standards, and praising the strength of female protagonists. Unravelling the complex web of connections between storytelling and feminism becomes an enthralling endeavour inside Morrison's literary environment.

Keywords - Toni Morrison, Literary, Book, Feminist, Ideologies.

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INTRODUCTION

The emancipation of women is central to many feminist ideologies and social, political, and philosophical organisations. To put it simply, feminism is a social movement that advocates for economic, political, and social equality between the sexes and the idea that a person's social identity or political, social, or economic rights should not be based on their gender. This pertains to the fact that different cultures and communities have assigned different, and sometimes normative, interpretations to sexual diversity. This class is focused on more than simply biology. Moreover, cultural norms around gender and sexuality vary.[1]

Important from a structural standpoint. Consequently, feminists disagree on the importance of gender as a categorization. Recognising women as human beings is a radical idea. The movement's overarching goal is a society in which women and men are treated equally. The prejudices are not being exposed and critiqued. This is an earnest effort to comprehend cultural norms and assumptions through the eyes of oppressed women and other minority groups. It is the belief of feminists that the current gap between powerful and oppressed groups must be bridged. Feminism now encompasses a wide range of ideologies and practices that go well beyond the "bra burning" ideals popularised by feminists in the '60s and '70s. Feminism, Post-Feminism, and Queer Theory are the three main schools of thought within it.[2]

A central tenet of feminism is the historical oppression, marginalisation, and exploitation of women. In its broadest definition, this critique is feminism. Beyond this, it addresses every social and political aspect of sexual suppression. Additionally, it sheds information on the many cultural contexts in which sexuality is addressed. Additionally, it takes a stand against oppression by embracing male roles and sexuality.[3]

Racism and sexism have been major themes in American literature, especially Black literature. These two ideologies play significant roles in their daily lives. The truth is that African American authors would often draw inspiration for their works from real-life incidents. In their writings, this is the voice that stands out the most. There are numerous valid explanations for why African Americans in the United States were subject to such bigotry and violence. White slave masters' efforts to suppress African Americans' history and ancestry have also been a source of suffering for this people.

> *Not only were they ugly in this country's eyes, but they also had to work. However, none of them was a man. They were stereotyped as being unattractive and unfeminine if they exhibited any of the assertiveness or intellect that are essential for success in the workplace.*

Consequently, in a capitalising global economy, feminism is utterly lexical: women authors are born, female education is growing, teaching is becoming a female career, and the women's literary market is

intensifying. Until the end of time, women authors will only be known as symbols of their gender, not as distinct persons, but as an integral component of literature. Publishing also required them to maintain a delicate equilibrium.[4]

In 1993, Morrison achieved history when she became the first African American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Among "the finest contemporary writers in America" (Faly 122), there is little dispute. [5] Swedish critics praised her works, praising her "unerring ear for dialogue and richly expressive depictions of Black America" and her "epic power" in her imagination. Beyond this, her writing explores the impacts of racism and sexism, incorporates elements of tradition and folklore, and delves into the challenges of maintaining a Black cultural identity in a white society, with a focus on her female characters. "My endeavour, though I refrain from revealing any details until I finish... is to address an issue that has been bothering me. However, when I consider it from a broader perspective, I employ the term 'bear witness' to clarify the purpose of my work."[6]

METHODOLOGY

To analyse the feminist literary criticism of Toni Morrison's books, this study will use a secondary data-based technique. It will systematically evaluate existing academic papers, book reviews, or critical essays. Our goal here is to find secondary materials that address feminist views on Morrison's works and synthesise them using credible resources like academic libraries and databases like JSTOR and PubMed. In order to identify critical perspectives, character dynamics, and recurrent motifs, we will use content and thematic analysis. By using this tack, we can be sure that the current academic discussion is fully grasped, which will enhance our examination of feminism in light of Morrison's remarkable literary achievements.

RESULTS

Toni Morrison's fifth book is Beloved. Morrison was enjoying her rising star status when this book came out in 1987. A best-selling novel, Beloved won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. Many people think it's Morrison's best book so far. Feminism serves as a background for Beloved's exploration of themes such as agency and helplessness, free will and responsibility, property ownership (of oneself and others), and the relative merits of individual and collective agency. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987. Everyone thinks it's her best work. The story revolves on a young woman who was sexually exploited while enslaved by a white guy. Upon her entrance into the story, it is indicated that it is a newborn infant. It is said that she is the sister of Denver and the daughter of Sethe. Perhaps she is a descendant of one of the many peoples who made it through the horrific Middle Passage, the perilous voyage over the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas as slaves.[7]

how "men without skin" are portrayed in Beloved. Since the first Europeans that the Africans saw lacked dark complexions, they assumed that they were skinless. Stamp Paid hears a rumble of voices as he goes to visit124, but he is unable to enter or even knock, which is more textual evidence supporting this reading. He hears other spectral voices, not only Beloved's. Morrison gives her novel's dedication to the "Sixty Million and more" on the page before the epigraph; probably these people. As Baby Suggs puts it, "good is knowing when to stop" (B 102), which is why she is against more. The community finds Sethe's celebration picnic offensive because of its abundance; Paul D also tells Sethe her love is "too thick.

In the book, Sethe isn't the only mother who murders her kids. Sethe learns from her grandmother that her mother "threw away" the children who came before her when she is a little girl. Since Sethe is the only kid who did not survive a rape, she is the only one she confides in. The baby doesn't make it beyond the first week because Ella refuses to nurse it. While these women murder because they despise their rapists and abusers, Sethe does it because she loves her victim. She kills Beloved because she loves him too much. Because of her unwavering love for her children, she cannot bear to see them endure the psychological, emotional, and physical torment of slavery.

Because Morrison brings up so many unresolved problems, we are left to ponder these weighty matters. Actually, the meaning of motherhood in general and in the context of slavery specifically. Consider the connections between Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Nan, Sethe's birth mother; Baby's interactions with her own children, etc.[8]

Beloved is an entity apart from its artistic qualities and shortcomings. This book goes beyond being just literary because of it. The author has maintained that this book is more than just an advocacy and protest piece. It stands for more than only the excellence and advancement of the American literary institutions that bestow honours upon its members. An really artistic and thoughtful piece of art. The utmost reverence is due it.[9]

The book Beloved is eerily gloomy and unsettling. There are a lot of gothic details and horrific acts of brutality. The strength of slavery's legacy is symbolised by the ghost. Even though Sethe has been free for eighteen years, the spirit continues to haunt her. The strength of the resurrected infant is touching, but she also represents the anguish of slavery in general. The writer cares more that readers understand Sethe's motivations and how her decision has affected her afterward. Setting Sethe's behaviour in perspective without either blaming or

justifying it, the book effectively puts into words the brutality and dehumanisation that comes about under slavery. There was "Double Jeopardy" for women of colour (Beal 90).

Feminism as a humanism threads the book's disjointed structure, which is intricately bound to the characters' minds and which abruptly weaves together the past and future. Describing what has happened in the past uses more room than what is happening right now. The concept that the past influences and lingers in the present is brought to light in a startling way. Rehashing the same plot points from the past while adding new details each time may become old fast. A troubled connection with one's own history affects every character in the book, whether they are descendants of slaves or not. Their history often gets in the way of their current and future plans, because enslavement shattered many of their methods of experiencing love and thinking about their own value as human beings.

Beloved delves into Morrison's worldview via the lens of love, family, and self-possession. For unknown reasons, the spectre of Sethe's deceased kid has returned, and she is beloved. At the age the infant would have been if it had survived, it takes on the persona of a mature lady. Morrison felt confined by the historical context, which inquired into many themes related to love and motherhood at an era when human life was often undervalued. The complexities of self-ownership and the repercussions of being owned by another are vividly depicted in the book.[10]

By examining Black America's origins via the feminist lens, Beloved offers a compelling narrative. Part of the story is on how a new culture and people emerged from a displaced population that had to overcome dehumanisation and cruelty to find their place in the world. It considers the delicate equilibrium of the self in relation to the community and the Other.

The infant's death occurs when the community, infuriated by Baby Suggs's success on an individual level, disregards the riders and their "duty" to safeguard a member of the community, despite the fact that the baby is already crawling. The community of women rallies in the end, with food contributions and thirty singing women coming to 'baptise' Sethe and expel the spirit, but no one sings as Sethe is taken from 124 Bluestone Road to be imprisoned for the murder.

The gender and socioeconomic disparities that exist in American society are pointed out by Morrison. At Sweet Home, Baby Suggs and Mrs. Garner work side by side; when giving birth to Denver, Amy and Sethe struggle "appropriately and well". However, these connections aren't perfect since Amy and Mrs. Garner are products of their time; the racist ideology of their communities shaped them.

A tale of a slave's life is thus presented in the narrative. It warns of rape, whippings, labour, and evasion. Morrison sheds focus on the individual stories of powerful female slaves while portraying this story of slavery and Black culture. "All of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of one group towards another group with physically different characteristics that compel one group to... treat the other as if it did not belong to the human race" (Hernton 175). This includes both outward displays of hostility and internalised biases.

Sethe, Baby Suggs, Beloved, and their connections are the key female characters in Morrison's book. Some have argued that Beloved is a feminist book. Despite the fact that the narrative focuses on the strong, self-reliant women in the book, it tells the tale of several slaves. It builds a feminist message as well.

The female body is being woven into the discourse via the essential pattern of beloved herself. She has baby skin, sleeps a lot, and has underdeveloped motor and speaking skills. By having Beloved physically represent the mother-child relationship, the author emphasises how deeply the kid identifies with his or her mother. She embodies, in her body, the discourse of motherhood as it pertains to slaves. By dying, her corpse becomes a sacrifice that saves the other students from the schoolmaster. She heals Paul D by removing his "tobacco tin heart" and replacing it with her "inside part" during their sexual encounter. Her life has been poisoned by Sethe's attention and mother guilt, and she feeds off of it. In order to put an end to all of the arguments that Paul D. and Sethe had because to the brutality of the schoolmaster, the corpse of Beloved is utilised as a writing surface.

The community views Sethe's murder of her kid as an unforgivable act. The community, on the other hand, kept quiet about the teacher's coming because of a little suspicion. The society as a whole must thus bear some of the guilt for the crime. Characters like Paul D. and Stamp Paid, on the other hand, do their best to help others and stay alive in the world after slavery. So, using feminist concepts as a background, readers may investigate the duality of good and evil.[11]

The narrative recounts the harrowing ordeals endured by a female slave via the incorporation of her own body into the text. The plot is loose and non-linear, and it allows the various enemy units to maintain their unique characteristics while yet having flexibility to manoeuvre. It keeps tabs on how intense its emotional response is and how big of an impact the events were. "This is not a story to pass on," Morrison's character remarks towards the book's conclusion. Here we see the novel's grave tone in action. It is undeniable that the text is feminine, and the inclusion of a woman's body and experiences in literature is an unusual event in and of itself. In the present, the characters reminisce over the unknown past, mocking it. As the plot twists and turns,

revealing more and more of its terror, it serves as a pivot around which the drama unfolds. Untangling a web of metaphors becomes akin to reading the narrative.

None of the story's protagonists remember their history. The plot revolves on the characters' journeys of self-discovery, as they acquire new knowledge and insights along the way. It wasn't until Paul D told her what happened to Halle that Sethe knew. Unless Beloved specifically asks, she forgets details about her own mother. Beloved and Sethe's peculiar "thick love" for her children go unnoticed by the community. The protagonists also have a hard time letting go of the past and embracing the here and now.

Being Beloved is all about how the past and present are connected in one's mind. Her demeanour is that of a newborn. The unsolved contradiction in the mother-child connection between Sethe and Beloved is the cause of her miraculous sign. Both historical enslavement and the current condition of freedom crumble under the nature of Beloved. In an effort to save her from the horrors of slavery, her mother has her killed. A skewed interpretation of the binary led to her demise. The temporal binary collapses because she arrives at 124 as the young lady. She forces Sethe to think about her mother and the African language she spoke as a youngster but has now forgotten. Because of her parental guilt, Sethe first refuses to acknowledge Beloved as her deceased infant and, by extension, rejects the past. While doing so, however, she remains in this world, fixated on things of yesteryear. During her 124 years on Earth, Beloved paints a picture of a time capsule in which the past and present merge into a one reality and where previous hurts are revisited, recalled, and finally left behind. As she moves through the present, she exorcises the horrors of her own history, which she either embodies or just embodies. From a feminist perspective, the novel's depiction of good and evil is clear.[12]

Children without parents who pass away are known as "orphans" in jazz. "Beginning by reducing his Black slave's human self to a body, and then that body to an object; he dehumanised his slave, made him quantifiable, and absorbed him into a rising global market of productive exchange" (Kovel 18). Tragedies include the deaths of Dorcas's parents in the riots, Vera Louise's parents being disowned and so dead to her, the loss of Rose Dear and May's mother when Vera Louise decides to take True Belle away, and the suicide of Violet's mother, Rose Dear.

It seems that the demons that plague Joe and Violet are finally cast out. Joe sees a figure in the dark that "forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing" while he and his mother lie in bed together; this is how they join their moms in symbolism. On the other hand, Violet places her palm on his chest, making it seem like the well's sunny edge, and someone is collecting presents to give to everyone there. For Felice's part, the pair may take on the role of surrogate parents. While Felice sees more similarities between Joe and her father, Violet instructs her to imagine her ideal world based on trees.

Regardless, Morrison gradually approaches the significance of jazz and the blues within the broader framework of early 20th-century African American urban culture, a complex web of blues, jazz, and Harlem-specific motifs. A more comprehensive investigation is required for that. Through Morrison's creative narrative tactics, readers are able to hear the tale and voice of a Black female who was previously hushed and oppressed. Jazz uses "voice" in the sense of the cultural artefact through which Black women's stories have been and are repeatedly "heard"; the book and its citations of what Houston Baker, Jr. terms the "blues matrix" are similar. Looking back to the cultural period between the blues and jazz, it also shows that it doesn't take African American women's migratory experiences into consideration. The 'classic blues,' a cultural style that was primarily promoted via the 'race record' industry and was associated with women, naturally finds a new home in that format. To fully appreciate Morrison's multi-layered prose, such background information is essential. An African American female "crossroads" is created by her all-encompassing implication on blues, jazz, and Harlem imagery, and by the figurative use of the narrator as a technological composite of the phonograph and record to "play" cultural narratives that the characters either retort or refuse to agree with.

The novel's narrator discusses the experiences of these newcomers, who arrived in a nearly all African American Harlem, with particular emphasis on the city's streets and sidewalks:

> *No matter how, when, or why they arrived, once their leather shoes landed on the concrete, there was no going back. Their leased room may have been darker than a morning toilet and smaller than a heifer's stall, but they remained so they could see their numbers, hear themselves in the crowd and imagine themselves marching down the street with hundreds of others who had done the same thing.*

It is evident from this paragraph that there are both literal and figurative allusions to the material circumstances of Black migrants' survival prior to their migration to the metropolis, specifically referring to the overcrowded and costly housing conditions they typically endured.[13]

Jazz mostly focuses on Violet. What the narrator calls her "private cracks" are really just a series of visions that make her doubt herself. Maybe it's the connection between African American women and

the social sphere, especially in respect to the Harlem neighbourhood:

> *Due to their nature, I refer to them as cracks. Dark fissures in the day-lit globe, rather than openings of fractures. When she first opens her eyes in the morning, she perceives a series of brief, bright sights. Things like eating, working, meeting new people, and exploring new locations are all part of each one. But these are not activities she sees herself engaging in. It is being done by her. Assuming there is a sturdy base at the bend where the globe light ends, it holds and bathes each scene. The reality is that there is absolutely no base, only winding passages that one must constantly navigate.*
>
> *Also, the illumination from the globe isn't ideal. Upon closer inspection, it reveals seams, fissures that were poorly bonded, and vulnerable areas that conceal nothing. Absolutely nothing. When Violet isn't careful, she steps into these crevices; for example, she once sat on the pavement by folding her legs instead of pushing her left heel forward.*
>
> *A complex link between the lives of African American women and many deterministic cultural narratives is highlighted by the mental gaps Violet experiences, which are analogous to the gap in a record that causes it to bounce and, as a result, cannot continue playing.*
>
> *The locals label Violet as "crazy" because she sits on the street, gets accused of "stealing" a baby, and then tries to desecrate Dorcas's corpse at the burial. The one whose mind has been warped by living in the city for twenty years, such that others refer to her as "Violent," is Violet, in Rodrigues's view. The Harlem sidewalks are shown in a manner that draws attention only to the blues stories that the protagonists fight. That Joe's quest for Dorcas takes him from country trails to railway tracks to city pavement (which Morrison likens to record grooves) implies that the fatalism commonly associated with the City originates in the South and the psychological, cultural, and economic effects of slavery. Anyone may acquire a unique reference to this narrative junction when Alice asks Violet whether Joe had ever beaten her:*
>
> *“Hey Joe! No. Nothing ever gets injured by him. That is, with the exception of Dorcas.*
>
> *"And little rodents." "What do you mean?"*
>
> *Also rabbits. Bighorn sheep. The marsupial. Wild fowl. Back home, we had wonderful food.*
>
> *Then why did you depart?*
>
> *Landowner was not interested in rabbits. He is seeking tax breaks.*
>
> *"Money is also important to them".”*
>
> *“But I can show you how to acquire it. When I first arrived, I worked throughout the day. Profitable for me were three residences every day. At night, Joe would clean fish. The hotel job didn't come his way for a long time. I started doing hairstyling, and Joe..."*
>
> *"Please, spare me the details of that."*
>
> *Violet remained silent as she fixed her gaze on the image. In an effort to lure her away from the home, Alice handed it to her.*

African American women's historical, economic, and social circumstances are made apparent in this. The writer uses the racial record narrative device to convey the story's central themes, which centre on the confused, jealous, and violent reactions of sexes to their post-emancipation freedom of choice in sexual relationships. As Violet stabs Dorcas in the heat of passion, the author draws inspiration from a photograph by James Van Der Zed depicting a young woman fatally shot at a party by her lover, who was armed with a silencer: 'As she lay dying, the young woman refused to identify the person who shot her'.[14]

The economic issue of slavery has overdetermined Violet's personal connection to reproduction. It is critical that she reacts appropriately when the individuals who looted her family's estate tipped her out of her position. "The most important thing Violet took away from that was never to have children," she said, echoing the sentiments of many female blues performers who perform on the road. For some reason, no little black foot would ever lay on top of another while a ravenous mouth cried out, "Mama?".

For ladies like Alice and Gertrude, Violet's outcast status in the salon society serves as a metaphor. Female blues singers such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith were criticised by Alice for their chaotic, angry, and even spiteful lyrics. Alice also criticised the women's marginal role in early jazz performances. Since Violet does not possess the necessary licencing to practice hairstyling, she is unable to overhear the conversations that occur between the licenced beauticians and their clients at the salon. However, she decides to inquire about "what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; the marcelling iron they used on her... the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates' Ebony Keys, which is fair except for his vocalist, who must be his wife since otherwise she would have allowed her to insult his band This is on page 5. Since most jazz bands are "made up completely of men," the narrator's comment about the female singer is in line with Linda Dahl's assertion that women had almost no other option except to play in legally sanctioned family bands.

These situations are comparable to Violet's exclusion from the salon's group discussion and, by extension, her community's almost every form of expression due to her insane, "unlicensed" conduct.

People in Violet's neighbourhood, both male and female, shun her because of her "wayward mouth" and her "crazy" behaviour. The tendency for her to shape "[w]ords connected only to themselves" Another possible interpretation of is that the increasingly homogeneous recording and distribution of women's classic blues has led to claims that it is no longer "authentic" since it has lost its distinctive regional characteristics. However, her status as an outsider allows her to experience a "double-consciousness" inside her own culture. Consequently, Violet feels compelled to identify with both Alice, a respectable community member, and the prostitutes simultaneously. This is because, while the sexually charged classic blues of women is tolerable because it allows an African American female communal voice to be expressed and survived, Violet knows that the prostitutes are crucial to her own survival:

> *“When no one else would help, they did. Their generosity allows Joe and me to eat. I don't want to hear about it.*
>
> *"I am willing to work all day, any day of the week on their heads whenever I am on the verge of borrowing or requiring additional."*
>
> *"Say nothing to me," I pleaded. Tell me where they get their money; I don't care.*

When it comes to the relationship between sexuality and violence among African Americans living in metropolitan areas, Alice would rather ignore the topic. Alice explains to Violet why she does not want to discuss these ladies in her response to her question:

> "*I see. The gentlemen. A life of misery. I thought they fought constantly. Is the prospect of a fistfight keeping you from getting your hair done? "Only when they're drunk." Violet grinned.*
>
> *"Oh, I see."*
>
> *"They fight each other, share men, and even fight over them." "No woman deserves to live that way."*
>
> *Oh no. Nobody should make a lady do it.* .

Violence and vengeance is a common topic in women's classic blues, and when women arm themselves, particularly with knives, it brings that idea to life. When it comes to women, Violet and Alice have both felt resentment and wanted vengeance at some point. In the course of their conversation, Violet accuses Alice of being "born with a knife" and wonders whether Alice has ever "picked one up". "Her craving settled on the red liquid coursing through the other woman's veins," Alice admits to herself, revealing that she had been "starving for [the] blood" of her husband's girlfriend. An picture that radiated several meanings—a "clothesline rope circling her neck" (J 86)—was one of Alice's thoughts about gratifying this yearning. It reveals the racist murders that fueled "the wave of Black people running from want and violence" that "crested in the 1870's; the 1880's' the 90's but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined in" (i.e., the years after the Civil War). (Job 33). Up to this point, it has also been a derogatory term for women, a "tool" that alludes to the home life that Black women were deprived of due to the domestic duties imposed on them by white families during and after slavery. It is to be expected that the most vicious anti-feminists would also be the ones who attempted to discredit Black people, given the shared economic, social, and psychological roots of the two groups. The origins of oppression were consistent regardless of a person's ethnicity or gender, but the methods of oppression varied.[15]

CONCLUSION

In 1973, Morrison released Sula, a book that followed the lives of two ladies. A woman returns to her hometown, but this time she refuses to accept traditional female duties and instead asserts her own ideals and freedom of choice. The first lady believes in a traditional position in the village. The stresses endured by Black families as they are compelled to assimilate into mainstream society while still clinging to their traditional African American history are beautifully captured in Song of Solomon (1977). In this section, the author allows the characters to transcend their mundane existence by incorporating elements of mythology and the supernatural into the storyline of the book. Published in 1981 and taking place in the Caribbean, Tar Baby once again employs myth and spectral figures to soften the blow of a life where every interaction is antagonistic, particularly in societies where women and Blacks are at odds with one another. Morrison earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for her novel Beloved, which was based on the true tale of a slave mother who sacrificed her child to absolve it of servitude. Obviously, Jazz (1992) has two stories, one set during Reconstruction and the other during the Jazz Age. Slavery and injustice impacted African Americans for years, and this theme runs throughout the book. Love (2003) shows the proprietor of a once-popular East Coast beach resort for African Americans, while Paradise (1998) recounts the lives of nine Black families who inhabit a little agricultural village in Oklahoma in the 1940s. Both books are considered Morrison's most recent works.

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