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Paritosh Mandal
Research Scholar, Sunrise
University, Alwar, Rajasthan,
India

The black community women and their identity

Paritosh Mandal

Abstract

The concept of identity is regarded as one of the most important concepts in contemporary literature. Individuals and societies always search for an identity that gives meaning to their existence. The lives of African-American women have been critically affected by racism, sexism, and classism, which are systems of societal and psychological restrictions. The racist, sexist, and classist structure of the African-American community compartmentalizes its various ethnic groups, denigrates the colored as inferior and characterizes males and females as centre and margin respectively. Black women are relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race and sex. Black women have been victimized not only by the racist and sexist assumptions but also by class exploitation which is, perhaps, the greatest source of oppression of the blacks in America. The basic myth of racism is that the white is more intelligent and more virtuous than the blacks by the mere fact of being white. Furthermore, whiteness is automatically equated with beauty and culture, and blackness with ugliness and slavery. Sexism mutilated the blacks and minds of African-American women and, what was worse, defiled their sexual beings and scarred them psychologically. Thus, to be black and female is to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender bias. The double whammy of blatant white racism and black male sexism have hurled black women headlong into the dismal abyss of 'geometric oppression.' If the dominant racist group has condemned them through an abusive ideology, black men, by virtue of their phallic superiority, have held black women as their scapegoats, victimizing them in every conceivable way. Black women suffer not only because they are black and female but also because they are economically poor. The ideal concept of woman in American community is not just racist and sexist but essentially classist. In an African-American society, black women, who could hardly approximate the norm, are discriminated against and dehumanized. Therefore, the present paper aims at giving an overall view of the subject of identity in African-American culture with particular focus on African American women playwrights. It has become quite obvious that the women playwrights aim at pushing the blacks, especially the women, to feel proud of their black identity.

Keywords: Identity, African American, women, black community

Introduction

In America, Black writing was the result of the condition of the oppression of the black people. Black writers voice their oppression and suppression in all walks of life. Their writing is a kind of social protest and human enlightenment. It depicts black life and black culture. It is mostly written by Black African-American writers, mostly women in general about women in particular. It narrates black women's lives and their struggles and victimization due to racism, sexism and capitalism. In fact, the literature of the black women is expansive and more liberating as it deals with the political machinations of the racial and sexual beliefs. Even the very foundation of black African - American Literature was the sorrow and strain of the black African - American community and slavery. Black African - American writing can be traced back to Philip Wheatley. By the end of 1970s, many writers came into focus within the black African - American writing. They dealt with the issues like racism, sexism and classism in American society. Black fiction in the 1970s and 1980s moved away from a homogenized sense of a unified and unifying black community and over reliance upon the binarism of positive/negative images of the black people. It is engaged with a pluralistic sense of experience incorporating the multiple subjectivities that constitute the individual's sense of identity. Issues of ethnicity are articulated and explored within a larger hierarchy of articulated differences: racial, gendered, cultural, and sexual differences. Toni Morrison was born in 1931 in Ohio, which embraced in microcosm the schizophrenic nature of the union itself in which the free states of the north and the slave states of the south were

Corresponding Author:
Paritosh Mandal
Research Scholar, Sunrise
University, Alwar, Rajasthan,
India

brought together. In fact, in presenting Ohio in her novels, she has two major concerns: first, it reflects the pursuit of individual advancement by black people in a white dominated nation and culture; second, it suggests her interest in the reclamation of 'black solidarity'. In fact, she is concerned with the memory of slavery and white America's continual denial of the black people and their rights. She chronicles the lives and concerns of the Midwestern black community in her novels. Morrison not only advocates the need for strong and healthy human bonding in African – American society but also she deals with the pain and agony caused by the African – American society and various issues like slavery, sexism, and so on.

The black women suffered a lot in their community and lost their identity. In her novels, she portrays women and their problems and fading away of identity in the black community. Her themes include racism, slavery, sexism, segregation, quest for identity, Search for self and so on. Like other black women novelists of the contemporary world, Morrison analyses the role of women, community and the search for an identity and an authentic self in existence. Morrison is highly esteemed as a unique and powerful voice in the contemporary African – American literature as she chronicles the lives and concerns of the Midwestern community in her novels. Her fiction depicts the struggles and joys of the journey of the blacks to self – awareness, blending the real and surreal to explore the shortcomings of everyday life of the blacks. The denouements of many of her novels favour community, the moral responsibility of individuals to each other, the reclamation of traditional black values, and the importance of ancestors.

A number of factors contributed to Morrison's development of aesthetic consciousness – environment, family background, community, African – American folklore, her educational background, early professional life, Random House experience and literary works by great writers. Morrison has written novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003). *Eye* is set in a small Midwestern town in Lorain, Ohio, during the years of economic depression. It tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, who by hating her black self, yearns for blue eyes, which she believes will make her white, extinguish her position as a Pariah and give her love and security that are desperately missing from her life. *Sula* may be taken as a testament of black consciousness among women like Sula and Nel. *Solomon* compels one to get in touch with his or her African heritage in order to comprehend and appropriate one's true self and establish a higher quality of existence. *Baby* examines the relationship between the blacks and the whites. It is a novel about the black community. *Beloved* artistically dramatizes a haunting amalgam of the past and present experiences of an escaped female slave, tracing the heroine's quest for meaning and whiteness in slavery and in freedom. *Jazz* depicts the experiments of a black community. *Love* manifests different facets of love – hate, lust, envy, attachment and so on. Morrison explores multiple meanings of love in different human relationships. Morrison in *Eye* focuses on a distorted parent – child relationship in the character of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old ugly black girl, who longs for the bluest eye, which would make her beautiful. This novel shows how the lack of beauty batters her relationship with

her parents and other people. It exhibits domestic violence and the distorted Parent – child relationship. It also highlights the friendship between Pecola Breedlove, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer. Pecola is the object of scorn in the black community because she is ugly by the society's standards. The novel shows the devastating effects of the false standards of beauty on the human relationships between the individual and the society. *Sula* shows violation of friendship, husband – wife relationship, and love affairs. It mainly traces the friendship between two young black girls –

Sula Peace and Nel Wright. In the end of the novel, Sula has to die and Nel has to lament over her death even though Sula has separated Nel from her husband. Sula – Nel bonding/ friendship provides more scope for critical examination. Sula mocks and challenges the attitudes and values of the black society/ community. Consequently, she is ostracized by the black society. *Solomon* is the story of a character called Milkman David. This novel delineates the barren and broken relationship between Milkman and his parents. His father loves the possession of property above all; whereas, his mother loves the deified memory of her father. In it, Ruth David and her husband Macon Dead II have twisted and tangled relations. Macon's infatuation for money and Ruth's obsession for the memories of her dead father result into the distortion of husband – wife relationship. It also highlights the love affair between Milkman Dead and his cousin Hagar.

Baby relates the love affair between Jadine and Son. Jadine is a beautiful black model, moulded by white culture and Son is a black young man, who loves her. But this love affair is put on trials because of the conflicting values and lifestyles. Morrison also focuses on the loveless marriage between Margaret and her husband. It also depicts a cross-cultural relationship. Jadine is a quasi – member of two communities – the family of her black parents and the white family of her financial benefactors. In this novel, black and white worlds are placed together, which reveal the full spectrum of human relationships, amongst the women and men of the Black Community. *Beloved* shows the relationship of Sethe to her child. Sethe is a former slave, who killed her baby in the past, rather than to have her live a life of slavery. It gives an experience of the havoc happened because of the unfathomable affection of a slave mother for her child. It also portrays the communal life of Sethe and Halle, whose matrimonial relationship is at the mercy of their white masters. The relationship between Sethe and Paul D is yet another variation of man – woman relationship in a Black Community. *Jazz* explores a lofty love between Joe Trace, a salesman of women's beauty products, and Dorcas, a teenage high school girl. For Dorcas, everything is like a picture show. Once, she goes dancing without him. So, in a fit of overwhelming desire, he shoots her. In her dying declaration, she refuses to identify her killer. The novel delineates the sublimity of the teenage love, although Joe is a married man and has an extra-marital relationship with Dorcas. The novel presents a triangular love relation between Joe, his wife Violet, and the teenage girl Dorcas. In *Paradise*, the young mother, Mavis, beset by unbearable circumstances and abused by her husband, leaves her husband and her infant twins in a Cadillac car on a hot day with the windows up and babies die. She then repents and says that they were only children, who were not on any trial for her. It presents the picture of a male dominated world.

The women living at the convent are either abused by their husbands or lovers or having some unhappy past. The black men of Ruby see them as bad and a threat to their moral lives. Love depicts love-hate relationship with lust, envy and attachment. It reflects the different facets of love, shifting from desire and lust and ultimately comes to a full circle to the indelible and overwhelming first love. May, Christine, Head, Junior, Vida are women obsessed by Bill Cosey. He shapes their yearnings for a father, husband, lover, guardian, and friend.

Finally, Morrison has made it her unique canon to project the battered women as their heroines in their novels. She shows how the white feminists have miserably been abortive in their so called projection of the problems of women universally. Although feminist theory has examined the way a patriarchal language fails to articulate women's experience, studies of domestic violence need to remain self-conscious. The language in these feminist studies omits African-American women's self-representation of their own battered bodies in domestic violence cases.

In her novels, Morrison proposes that it is the pressure and false values forced upon black women by the white society that hamper the stability of the black family in general and women in particular. K. Sumana in *The Novels of Toni Morrison: A Study in Race, Gender, and Class* says: "Morrison's characters discover that they escape the black community's socio-economic disorder only to face, later, the all-encompassing psychological chaos characteristic of life in a society polarized along racial lines" (76). Morrison's novels artistically document her awareness of and concern for the historical conditions of oppression of African people in America. "In her first three novels, *Eye*, *Sula* and *Solomon*, Morrison confronts the notion of ideal family to which the black community aspires and what is more, exposes the surface respectability and security represented by the husband, wife, and children" (Sumana, *The Novels of* 96). Further, Sumana writes:

However, after her first three novels Morrison shifts from polarizing feminine households and nuclear families to exposing the decadence of the white family, and finally to historicizing the emotional and psychological obstacles to familial bliss incurred by blacks. She thus expands her vision of the family beyond the constraints of time, place and dimension in an endeavour to reconstruct the origins and significance of family. (96-97)

Though all the three elements-race, gender and class-are present in all the novels of Morrison, the emphasis on them varies from novel to novel. *Eye* examines racism as a primary source of oppression of the Africans. *Sula* lays emphasis on gender oppression. *Solomon* emphasizes on the importance of knowing one's history to determine one's identity. *Baby* is about class contradictions that keep African people divided. *Beloved* is about the solution-collective class struggle, that will help solve the exploitation and oppression of the African people. Certainly, no one could choose and develop such themes as racism, gender oppression, identity crisis, class contradictions and class exploitation within the African race, as well as collective class struggle and women bonding, without herself having a commitment to struggle for African people. And, certainly no one would be concerned enough to shape her works into narrative structures that enhance the themes, without herself being interested in turning theory into practice.

Morrison alternately shows the black women as victors and as victims throughout the novel, but their ultimate aura of strength is embedded in the fertile, earthy, untamed images of the South. Like *Eloe* and the Caribbean island in *Baby*, like *Shalimar* in *Solomon*, and like the *Bottom* in *Sula*, the nurturing places are feminine. The *Oven* and the *Convent* are the primary images in Morrison's *Paradise*, and they represent the femaleness of the novel. Although, the men built the *Oven*, which was the communal gathering place for the town, its importance is that it was the place where the women baked the bread that sustained the community. Convents have traditionally been situated away from the world of men and have represented havens for women saving themselves for God. In *Paradise*, the *Convent* represents the last refuge for women trying to find themselves and an escape from the sordid lives society has dealt with them. Whereas the *Oven* embodies mystical qualities tied to the nurturing actions of women, it loses this influence as the town of *Haven*, Oklahoma, comes to represent the damaging power of the men, who embody the physical and emotional destruction of women. The five women of the *Convent* come to represent a challenge to the male authority, a challenge that the men of *Ruby* must eliminate. Morrison uses the brutality of the assault on the women of the *Convent* as an indication of the emotionless, cold, calculating nature of men in fear of losing their power over women, and thereby their dominant position in the society. The mystical survival of the *Convent* women, however, moves from the material world of men to the spiritual world of women.

Morrison in her novels clearly indicates that in spite of their strength, courage, intuition and knowledge, women like *Pilate* or *Sula*, have been, throughout history, looked out of a fully integrated myth in which they are central and in which they can connect to and transmit a regenerative legacy, and therefore make themselves and those around them. On the whole, the myth of heroism allows women to assist in and benefit from the quest for a self and place within the family, society, community, and culture.

Morrison's development of the women characters in her novels parallels the way in which most black women combine their concern for feminism and ethnicity. Morrison exposes the damages that sexist oppression, both inside and outside of the ethnic groups, has had on black women but she does not allow these negatives to characterize the whole of their experience. She does not advocate a solution to their oppression-an existential, political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group. Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression. Generally, through her main characters, who are mainly black women, Morrison reveals the dynamic blacks who live in towns, coming to grip with their search for selfhood in the empty, meaningless world, whether urban or agrarian, to which they belong. Through her characters, Morrison forces readers to see the value of a life that is authentic because the individual assumes responsibility for the self. They express either an effort of the will or a freedom of the will. She reminds of the importance of "Flying without ever leaving the ground" (SS 340), of accepting and performing the existential art of self-creation, and consequently of knowing what one must know in order to become a complete, fully aware human being.

She suggests that the journey toward the wholeness must be continuous.

Conclusion

Such a journey must emerge from one's sense of responsibility toward personal fulfillment. Her women characters are usually characters in transition, journeying through the mysterious circumstances and personal histories to the innermost psyche often to a triumphant discovery of selfhood. However, her women are marginal / liminal personalities, who lack social, spiritual, psychological, historical, geographical, or genealogical place or center. Writing out of both the black and black women's experiences/traditions, Morrison's novels are a rejection of the white patriarchal modernism. They are radical revisions of the race and male-centred Afro-American literary tradition. They aim to liberate the latter from the social realism into which it has long been mired. Morrison's novels illustrate the idea that the blacks who have benefited from the civil rights movement now work in main street stores and teach in the schools but instead of seeking a new place, a place that might be called a community, they see that "now there are places left, just separate houses, with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by" (S 166). They attain their status as women and align themselves to a community and establish an identity and an authentic self. It is their journey to the liberation.

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