

THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF TONI MORRISON: EXPLORATIONS IN LITERARY CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT: Toni Morrison is the greatest Black woman novelist of America world who prominently emerged on literary scene in the 1960s. She wrote about matters such as White racism, women, social realism, politics and suffering. She became successful in writing symbolically about race and women. Also she has emphasized the relation between the work of art and its political relevance. Morrison was born in the town of Lorain, Ohio, USA, in 1931. Her father was a shipyard welder and her mother sang in the church choir. As the South in America was very unfriendly towards the Blacks, her parents moved to North, particularly to Ohio, hoping that the environment would be friendlier towards them. Morrison attempted to create a literary form based on Black American oral traditions. The main focus of this study is the analysis of the writings of Morrison. It also focuses on various streams of Feminist Thought and its culmination as the Womanist Thought. This study examines the life and struggles of the oppressed people from the perspective of women. It also expresses how men and women can work together to overcome their problems and create a paradise on earth.

Keywords:- Toni Morrison, Black woman, Literary Criticism.

INTRODUCTION:-

The impact of Toni Morrison on contemporary culture has been revolutionary and profound. In assessing that impact, Susan R. Bowers begins with "Morrison's most revolutionary-and most defining-act" of writing "for black readers about black people." This singular and courageous act "challenged white hegemony" and simultaneously "credited the complexity and originality of African American life by working within its intricate and real system of meaning, language, and art." Why and how Morrison dared to do so lies "in her historical and cultural contexts, since so much of her oeuvre has been dedicated to re-historicizing black history." Bowers traces Morrison's development within the African American communities that, like Morrison's grandparents, migrated from the black South to the black North, bringing with them the black vernacular tradition.

That tradition and "its embodiment of transformative and creative elements" empowered "Morrison's project of writing outside the white gaze."

The twenty-first century is likely to witness the richest vein of women's literature. It will be based on the richness of female experience. The copious outpouring of contemporary women has shown the frustrations, struggles, sufferings and also their successful experiences. Women throughout the world have been suffering a lot because of lack of experience. The experiences and the sufferings of women spurred them and enabled them to pick up their pens, so that women in future might suffer less. The term *feminism* was derived from the Latin word '*femina*' meaning '*woman*' and was first used in connection with the issues of equality and Woman's Rights Movement. Feminism perceives that women suffer from social injustice because of their gender. It attempts to eliminate their sufferings and enable them to achieve the freedom to order their own lives and to be recognized as individuals *per se*. The idea of an egalitarian society must prevail. The dialectics of male dominance and female passivity must be erased. Feminism is a specific kind of discourse: "a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (Belsey and Moore 122).

In the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Catherine McKen describes feminism in its broadest sense, "it refers to any theory which sees the relationship between the sexes as one of inequality, subordination, or oppression, and which aims to identify and remedy the sources of that oppression". Feminism focuses on the values of "equality, self-development, individual achievement, and freedom from restraint on the one hand, and the actual norms of male preference, discriminatory treatment, and restriction of women's development, self-expression, and activity on the other" (Ferree and Hess 172). According to Germaine Greer feminism "straggles not about assimilation but about asserting difference, endowing that difference with dignity and prestige, and insisting on it as a condition of self-definition and self-determination" (1). Therefore, the aim of feminism is to wrench power from the male oppressors and establish an egalitarian society in which sexual difference and sexual hierarchy will no longer exist. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* defines "feminism" as a: "movement for the political, social, and educational equality of women with men".

The patriarchal society considered women as imitative, decorative, procreative and destructive. They looked women as an object. The long history of patriarchal theory proved the inferiority of women. The feminists started to argue about the theory, which is impersonal and public, and which is related to male's perspective. Because of the abuse of material support like education and money, women were considered to be dependent. Through emotional and moral values, women were placed in the secondary position. They had no legal and public existences. Men considered themselves to be superior to women because men looked upon themselves as rational beings and women as non-rational. So, the rational must control the non-rational and the order must control the disorder. Through marriage, a woman gets protection from her husband. Men are considered as the abler and stronger persons, so the husbands inherited the property and had authority over wives and children. The person who got the property rights can alone get the public rights. So, the property should be handed over to the husband. The woman, who does not have property rights, has no control over inheritance, and no rights to bring civil suit. So, those men who had rights to participate in the public affairs became citizens and women were excluded from the role of citizens.

(a) Liberal Feminism:

Women who fight for their equality were known as the Liberal feminists. They fought to get economic rights, legal rights, public rights and social rights. "Liberal feminism was organized on the concept of the social contract, individualism, independence, democracy, and equality of opportunity" (<http://www.saint-milce.Org/LiberalismVFeminism.html>). When the Declaration of Independence was transcribed, a new meaning was applied to women. Even though women got the natural rights, their voice in public affair was not recognized. After marriage women lost all their property rights to their husbands, and women also gave their wages to them. Their husbands became their masters, so their husbands had all the power to deprive women's liberty. Women fought for their rights because they did not receive equal pay. They were also excluded from the professions of theology, medicine and law. They were never allowed the leadership positions in the church. Women remained enslaved and they were taught by men to strengthen then-body and mind to be beautiful and to serve men. Without knowing that they were in the cage they beautified themselves. They were "created to be the toy of man" (Donovan 9) and whenever men had chance, they ill-treated women. Liberal feminists believed that it was women's responsibility to preach that whatever was morally right for a man to do was morally right for a woman. Liberal feminists felt that proper education and proper training in critical thinking would make women realize their rights. It would enable women to think

clearly and sensibly about their own situation. Liberal feminists believed that keeping half the human race in a state of ignorance retarded the progress of the entire race. When women thought differently or incorrectly, it was due to lack of training. Critical thinking generated faith in individualism and helped their self-determination. It would enable them to think for themselves and they could control their lives. Liberal feminists believed that critical thinking could liberate the individual from the mindless repetition of mere physical existence and proper education could liberate women from subjugation to their conditioned role of serving men. Only when a woman became independent, such self-empowerment could happen. Liberal feminists also felt that marriage was the field which was created to manipulate the emotions of women. So, the Liberal feminists projected the idea, "a woman must learn to take responsibility for herself, she is in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny to function freely, to enjoy her natural rights" (Stanton 1:815). They urged women to educate their daughter's in 'courage' and 'self-dependence' to function freely and to enjoy her natural rights. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Sarah Grimke's *Letters on Equality* present the idea against women's subordination developed in the liberal tradition.

(b) Cultural Feminism:

The second stream of feminism taken into account is Cultural Feminism which emphasizes the difference between men and women. Liberal feminists were of the view that men and women were equal and therefore, they should be given equal treatment in all avenues of life. Whereas the Cultural Feminism viewed that there are fundamental personality differences between men and women, and that differences of women are special and should be celebrated. Cultural feminists accepted the notion of biological differences between men and women. Cultural Feminism is defined as "a theory that wants to overcome sexism by celebrating women's special qualities, women's ways, and women's experiences, often believing that the "woman's way" is the better way" (<http://www.amazoncastle.com/femsm/ecocult.html>).

(c) Radical Feminism:

Radical Feminism strives towards freedom of women. Both Cultural and Radical feminists accept the difference between men and women biologically, but Cultural feminists assert the fundamental personality of women. Radical feminists were of the view that men and women were biologically different and this factor must be taken into account by women while fighting for equality and freedom.

Radical Feminism views the oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression, one that cuts

across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. This is a movement intent on social change, change of rather revolutionary proportions, in fact. Radical Feminism is called 'radical' because it is struggling to bring about really 'fundamental changes in society'. Women who were interested in getting to the roots of the problems in society became Radical feminists. Radical Feminism is concerned with the analysis of the oppression of women as women. Its basic aim stated that there shall be no characteristics, behavior, or roles ascribed to any human being on the basis of sex.

(d) Lesbian Feminism:

Lesbian Feminism is an offshoot of Radical Feminism. The new female-centered radical thought provided new definitions for sex. It believed that the female honour does not mean virginity, chastity and fidelity to a husband, but honesty among women. Lesbian is "a woman who devotes her energies to other women, who refuses to be identified in terms of a man" (Donovan 161).

(e) Freudian Feminism:

When women's movements were insisted upon women's rights, Freud was the first to analyze the relations within the family, the role of men and women in the family. In his theory, he says that all human beings are basically good when they are children, but they become bad because of the influence of the society. Freudian psychoanalysis is a source of truly feminist analysis of sexual difference and the construction of gender in patriarchal society.

Freud suggested in his *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905) that there is no pure masculinity or femininity. Every individual has the union of both the masculine and feminine qualities. This is based on time and situation. Sometimes the masculine qualities have the sense of feminine and feminine qualities have the masculine behaviour. So there is a 'bi-sexual disposition' in all people.

Freud had developed the child's psychosexual development in three stages- pre-genital, genital, and puberty. In the pre-genital period, boys and girls are equal. There is no difference between them. At this period, the child feels warmth and care and also gets food from the mother. So, the child is automatically attracted towards mother whether it is a boy or girl. At this period, child's sexual object turns towards the person who loves him or her since childhood.

(f) Marxist and Socialist Feminism:

Like Freud, Marxism is also relevant to feminist ideology. "Marxist Feminism" is more appropriately called "Socialist Feminism" (Ferree and Hess 30). Socialist Feminism postulates that men determine their being and it exists on class consciousness, where the

ruling class (man) saw the world from the perspective of their own class and not from the oppressed class (woman). In general men came under the ruling class and they never considered women, the oppressed class. In the family circumstances, the Socialist Feminism indicated that the "natural division of labour in the family created the first form of ownership, of one person by another; who saw the enslavement of the wife and children by the husband as the first form of private property" (McLellan 476). They believed that through revolutionary activity and by realizing their oppressed condition, they could change the political and familial circumstances.

Socialist Feminism seeks an end to the exploitation of the weak by the strong and it sees patriarchy as another force that distorts and limits human possibilities. It argues that all social structures permitting men to control and benefit from women must be eliminated. Socialist Feminism emphasizes on changing the system, which exploited and oppressed women both in workplace and at home. The Socialist Feminism does not focus on the idea of women as a sex class. It is concerned with the fight against patriarchy and views that task as being inseparable from the struggle against capitalism and racism.

(g) Andro-Feminism:

Men who are involved in feminism are called Andro-feminists. Along with women, a few men also participated in women's independence movement. Men in feminism sound supportive and equal, but could also imply fellow-travelling, because, women are the subjects of feminism. Women are the initiators, makers, and its force. The feminists believe that men can be feminists but they cannot be women. It is true that a male who supports feminism ought to question himself "whether he as a male is really doing feminism a service in women's present situation by muscling in on the one cultural and intellectual space women have created for themselves within 'his' male-dominated discipline" (Belsey and Moore 122). The Andro-Feminists want to create an organic, harmonious whole, "male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism they are perpetually passing into one another" (Fuller 115-116). Ibsen is an andro-feminist. He opines that in practical life woman is judged by Man's law, and she cannot be herself in the society. The laws are framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view. He also insists that woman should be an individual person both at home and out of her home.

(h) Amazon Feminism:

Amazon Feminism is dedicated to the image of the female hero in Greek mythology and in fact, as it is expressed in art and literature, in the feats of female

athletes, and in sexual values and practices. Amazon Feminism focuses on "physical equality and is opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to be, look or behave as if they are passive, weak and physically helpless. Amazon Feminism rejects the idea that certain characteristics or interests are inherently masculine or feminine, and upholds and explores a vision of heroic womanhood" Amazon Feminists tend to view that indeed, all women are as physically capable as all men, and those who are physically capable for such job, should pursue such jobs regardless of gender.

(i) Eco feminism:

Ecofeminism looks at nature, politics, and spirituality in a new way. Eco feminists believe that the domination of women is directly connected to the environmental misuse and pillage of our earth. From this core tenet, a philosophy flourished based on the interconnected web of life. Ecofeminism is "a theory that rests on the basic principle that the patriarchal philosophies are harmful to women, children, and other living things."

(j) Spiritual Feminism:

The idea of Spiritual Feminism has universal appeal because it excludes no woman. The word 'spiritual' itself has wide-ranging meanings within many communities, including the community of women. These feminists recognise the spiritual needs that had frequently motivated social movements and the desire for social transformation.

The next step in the evolution of Feminist Thought is broadly known as Womanist Thought. The following chapter deals with the drawbacks of the Feminist Thought as it was practiced and how the criticism leveled against it was met by the Womanist Thought.

The other works of Morrison are *Recitatif* (1983), the only short story she has written. Her only unpublished play is *Dreaming Emmett* which was performed in Albany, New York in 1986. Morrison's novel *Beloved* was adapted to film in 1998. It was directed by Jonathan Demme. Oprah Winfrey, a Black American television personality has taken up the role of Sethe. Morrison's contribution includes her song cycle, *Honey and Rue*, which was set to music by Andre Previn in 1993. And in, 1999, she published with her son Slade, *The Big Box*, a children's book. In addition to her fiction, Morrison has examined the role of race in American literature in her essay, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* in 1988. She also edited a few important books of essays on social problems in America-*Racing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* in 1992 and in 1997 she edited *Birth of a*

Nation'hood: Gage, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J.Simpson Case.

Morrison thus belongs to 'womanism', which has great admiration for the Black women's accomplishments and struggles against overwhelming odds. She values their indomitable will to rise above their degradation regardless of their life and status in the American society. In her writings she attempts to destroy the dehumanizing and unfair definitions imposed on Blacks and promotes an understanding of their life and culture which is viewed as an integral part of human experience.

The problems that African American women face in the American society and the way in which they overcome their problems as presented by Toni Morrison in her writings need special attention in order to understand her Womanist Thought.

CONCLUSION:-

The Nobel Prize for literature awarded to Toni Morrison in 1993 was, without any doubt, the recognition of her talents in the art of addressing universal issues, thus making the stories in her novels appeal to Blacks and Whites alike. In that respect, Toni Morrison's writings engage a wide variety of readers in compelling themes that turn around love, equality, community survival, racial and sexual politics, to name but a few. In fact, it is through those 'universals' that she deals with rewriting history, re-assessing cultures, investigating and confronting stereotypes of what it means to be Black or White as well as what it means to be a man or a woman in the United States of America. The main focus of this study is the analysis of the writings of Morrison. It also focuses on various streams of Feminist Thought and its culmination as the Womanist Thought. This study examines the life and struggles of the oppressed people from the perspective of women. It also expresses how men and women can work together to overcome their problems and create a paradise on earth.

Suggestions for Further Studies:

Further studies may be undertaken on how Alice Walker's exposition on Womanist Thought is endorsed or spurned by the African American women writers. Investigations may be undertaken on how the African American male writers project or reject Womanist Thought in their writings. Studies may also be undertaken on whether Womanist Thought is delineated in the writings of other women writers in America and the writers from other continents. Further investigations may show how far this Womanist Thought has been assimilated or rejected by writers of the third - world countries.

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