

# Existentialism and Identity Crisis of Blacks as a Community than as Individuals in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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## INTRODUCTION

The blacks suffered a lot due to their migration from South to the North, and to the central Mid-West. This created problems for them for their existence and identity. The major problems which they encountered were racial and social adjustments, class differentiation and a loss of identity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the blacks remained deprived of the basic principles of liberty, equality and justice enshrined in the American constitution. In American capitalism system people were divided into different circles on the basis of their race, sex and class. It was reflecting degree of power and powerlessness. The large circle was formed with white people most of them men experience influence and power. In the smaller circle there was a narrow space for black people experiences uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Third a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. The White American culture forced the blacks to search for their dignity and identity. Thus, in the fiction of Morrison one can study that the lives of blacks primarily deals with the exploitation and then their struggle for existentialism.

## MORRISON'S WORLD OF FICTION

Toni Morrison was born in 1931, in Lorain, a small northern town in the State of Ohio and died on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2019, in New York United States. Morrison started writing in her late thirties, "I was everybody," she discovered. "And I fell in love with myself. I reclaimed myself and the world (Carmean1)." Toni Morrison's career as a novelist begins with *The Bluest Eye* that was published in 1970. Her second novel *Sula* appeared in 1973. In 1974, she edited *The Black Book. Song of Solomon* her third novel, published in 1977, won the National Book Critics Circle Award as well as the American Academic and Institution of Arts and Letters Award. A fourth novel *Tar Baby* came out in 1981. In the year 1985 she won the New York State Governor's Award and in 1986 Book of the Month Club Award. She also won Before Columbus Foundation Award, Melcher Award and Robert F. Kennedy Award in the year 1988. She also won Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in the same year. Her fifth novel, *Beloved* published in 1987. Morrison has also written a play, *Dreaming Emmett*, which was first performed in January 1986. Her sixth novel *Jazz* published in 1992 is a literary improvisation of the grand tradition of melody. *Playing in the Dark Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, published in 1992, is her first work of literary criticism. *Paradise* her novel was published in 1998. Morrison was the

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recipient of the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature. *Paradise* was published in 1997 and *Love* in the year 2003. The journey of her writing continued with *A Mercy* in the year 2008 *Home* in the year 2012 and *God Help the Child* in 2015. In her contribution she has Children's literature, Short Fiction and Plays.

Strouse notes that being one of the foremost figures in contemporary American fiction Morrison has won international acclaim for works in which she examines the role of race in American society. Her novels are concerned with the condition of the exploited and oppressed African people depicting hopes and aspirations, joys and sorrows of black people who are constantly subjected to exploitation and suppression. She is an exponent of the new Black Renaissance. The purpose of the present study is to bring out Morrison's vision on black life, and quest for identity of blacks especially of women's. Morrison has explored the issues through her writings in a realistic and impartial manner.

## MORRISON'S VISION OF BLACK LIFE

Toni Morrison a woman of talent hails from a long line of hard-working, persevering black people who suffered racial oppression and socio-economic inferiority. "In her writings Morrison's stunning insight reveals the disrupted emotions produced by living in a world where white standards and goals are presented to blacks as uniquely important and at the same time impossible for them to achieve" (Christiana70). The sense of inferiority and ugliness rose in blacks due to the dominant white social value-system. Not only do the Blacks obtain their low self esteem from the whites, but also ingrain their white flavored aesthetic sense. The impact of this indoctrinated sensibility makes the protagonist Pecola in her novel *The Bluest Eye* a sufferer of rejection due to blackness. She yearns for blue eyes so that she may be loved and accepted by both whites and blacks. Through her characters Morrison has emphasized satirically to require the blacks to disparage their blackness if they wish to survive in a white man's world. As Shelby Steel says, "to be black was to be a victim; therefore not to be a victim was not to be black" (Lakshminarsaiah 9). In her first three novels Morrison has presented the world of racial injustice. The injustice inflicted on characters causes psychological scar, which results in the lawless behavior of characters like Guitar, Macon Dead, Circe, Henry Porter, Rail Road Tommy and others. In *Tar Baby* she suggests that individuals who have cut their ties with community, family and the past they have to assume fugitive, exile, expatriate and castaway.

In her novel *Beloved* Morrison has touched the aspect of black psyche with the black predicament that erupted in the experience of slavery in the nineteenth century America. Thus through her characters Morrison shows the forcing authority of whites upon blacks and its result on their behavior. In her novel *Jazz* we see a sensational incident of the killing of a black girl by her lover. The lover kills her just to indicate his dislike for his beloved's betrayal for the sake of his own satisfaction. This indicates the complexity of the life of African American. In her novels especially in *Paradise*, Morrison gives a vivid expression to black bitterness, on the exclusion by light skinned blacks due to their darker complexion.

In Morrison's novel the theme of root, identity and community depict slavery as the most oppressive period in the black history which has affected the identity of African American. Thus, Morrison tries to locate black identity in the socio-political ground where cultures are hybridized, powers are negotiated and individuals are reproduced as resistant agents. In *The Guardian* Morrison has stated that, "I'm writing for black people...I don't have to apologize"(4).

## **RACIAL PROBLEMS AND EXISTENTIAL DILEMMAS: SOCIAL EVIL, RACISM AND INJUSTICE**

Through the writings of Morrison the readers come to know that black fiction hangs between being an act of self-expression and a cry of protest. It attempts to portray the existing inequality, racism and social injustice that belies the ideals of American democracy. Morrison's novels present before us a clear picture of violating reality of the social life of the blacks. In the words of Baraka, "The Negro protest novelist postures and invents a protest quite amenable with the tradition of bourgeois American life" (Career 39). Paule Marshall, John Williams, Albert Murray & Toni Morrison tended to become spokesmen for the ambitions of the classes of black community. In her stories she remarks about the efforts of her contemporaries. "We raised our children and reared our crops; we let infants grow, and properly developed" (Henderson 22). This view enables Morrison to raise universal questions regarding the individual's role in his or her society. Morrison also conveys the message that the individuals and community's fates are inextricable; they are bound, as are the past, present and future.

## **EXISTENTIALISM & QUEST FOR IDENTITY**

Men in the novels of Morrison leave the responsibility of family to the women. They do so because so much of their identity is tied up with the notion that they provide financial rather than emotional support for their families. But in her later novels Morrison suggests that for the black family the problem was not just to survive but to succeed men in search of answers that may eventually bring them back changed. During the late nineteenth-century black woman both supported the family and bearded the burden of domestic responsibilities while white women grappled with their diminished roles. The cult of true womanhood that emerged during the nineteenth century had an intensely demoralizing impact on enslaved black females.

Toni Morrison reveals that throughout various cultures of the world, man is presented as the crown and glory of creation whereas women are its feet of clay. Black women were the victims of racial discrimination. For example Pecola the central character of *Bluest Eye* suffers due to her black beauty and leads an isolated life in the whole society. It depicts the tragic life of a young girl. Young black girls are unable to endure the brutality of their family and society towards their frail self-image and their parents are unable to sustain harmonious relationship in marriage. Quest for self is a motivating and organizing device in Morrison's fiction. As in her another novel *Sula*, Nel's and Sul's image is complicated due to their blackness Jennifer Aglow

suggests that Morrison's novels, "explore in particular the process of growing up black, female and poor" (Bjork 60). After going through her stories it becomes evident that her aim was to liberate the black women mentally, psychologically and economically. By doing so, she demonstrates her clear understanding of the period of slavery in America. It seems very tragic that the conditions that existed earlier are still present even today.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, through her characters Morrison demonstrates her vision on the socio-psychic interaction in the lives of black people to their specific situation. She brings out a variety of experiences to create the black world. Her writings constitute a series of scenes like the effects of community's acceptance or rejection of the individual. She has constantly focused on the quest for self-acceptance. Morrison also stresses that unless the black come to terms with their origin they shall never be able to acquire awareness independent of the false standards surrounding them. Her perception is of psychological motivation of the female especially, black particularly and human generally. Her novels explore the role of racial and gender identity in the development of the self and the community. It also explores the existentialism and identity crisis of blacks as a community than as individuals. In her writings Morrison chronicles the Afro American fly journey from enslavement to freedom.

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