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Role and Significance of Black Community in Toni Morrison's Fiction

Jyoti Deswal, Ph. D. Scholar

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Nature and Scope of Toni Morrison's Works

Toni Morrison, a Nobel Laureate, is considered one of the foremost figures in contemporary American fiction whose award-winning novels have won her international acclaim. In her fiction, Morrison addresses the issues related to the lives of Afro-Americans and explores the impact of socio-historic forces pitted against them. No doubt, Toni Morrison has received a good deal of critical attention and her novels have evoked wide and divergent critical response. A brief overview of Morrison's criticism would reveal the nature and scope of various approaches to her work.

Use of Black Cultural Tradition and Issues

Critics of African-American literature have demonstrated Morrison's aesthetic and thematic use of black cultural tradition. According to Trudier-Harris, the Afro-American history of tales, legends, beliefs and structure of folk-tradition form the basis of Morrison's novels.

Susan Willis analyses Morrison's novels from historical perspective and sees the process of history at work in Morrison's novels Melissa Walker examines Morrison's novels against the background of the Civil Rights Movement.

The feminist critics have focused on how gender shapes Morrison's texts. Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos study Morrison's portrayal of the black American women enduring life-long catastrophe. Barbara Smith finds both lesbian and feminist questions about black women's destiny in Morrison's class consciousness and cultural redefinitions.

There is yet another set of critics who have focused on the relationship between whites and blacks in Morrison's novels. James Berger finds Morrison depicting a pervasive system of racism in her fiction.

Some critics have delineated universal paradigms in Morrison's fiction. Terry Otten traces the pervasiveness of horrific love while Keith E. Byerman finds a nihilistic and black vision in Morrison's work. Critics like Denise Heinze and Gray Straff analyze the role of family in Morrison's novel.

Attention on Core Issue of Role and Significance of Community

This broad overview of various critical responses to Morrison's fiction reveals that most critics have ignored the core issue of role and significance of community in Morrison's fiction. There are, however, critics like Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, Patrick Bryce Bjork, Dorothy H. Lee, Roberta Rubenstein, Valerie Smith and Barbara Christian who take up the analysis of this vital concern of the author.

Wendy Harding and Martin observe that Morrison's concern in her novels centers around the black people and their community because her "creative imagination centers on the position of a community buffeted in the tug of war between two cultures" (Wendy & Mrtin:171).

According to the critics, "Morrison's characters barely seem to exist outside the collectivity," because "when they embark on self-defining quests that take them beyond the borders of their community, they generally disappear from the narrative framework" (Wendy & Mrtin:88).

Emphasis on Communal Consciousness

Patrick Bryce Bjork notes Morrison's emphasis on "communal consciousness" in her fiction. According to her, Morrison's black community "instead of defining itself in relation to external ideology or to the dominant group, emphasizes its own past, its own forms" (Bjork:14). Bjork says that Morrison does not merely point to the all-pervading presence of fears, frustration and fury in her community, she also "wishes to expose the psychic causes for social distortions within a black community." (Bjork:38).

Roberta Rubenstein interprets Morrison's black community as a vehicle through which behavior is expressed or reinforced; it is a "kind of collective conscience," that "fictions as a moral arbiter, the source of both individual and group norms."(Rubenstein:148). The critic further notes that the community "either includes or excludes its members on the basis of their accordance with its implicit-though frequently contradictory values."

Valerie Smith also underscores the importance of the black community in Morrison's fiction. The critic says that Morrison "does not provide her people with the option of living underground in isolation, beyond community" (Smith:274).

Dorothy H. Lee notes Morrison's preoccupation "with the effect of community on the individual's achievement and the retention of an integrated, acceptable self"(Lee:346). Barbara Christian, on the other hand, recognizes the use of community in Morrison's fiction as "place or setting" (Christian:65).

Community – A Motivating and Organizing Device in Morrison's Fiction

The studies of these critics however, fail to bring out the role and significance of community in Morrison's novel fully. A careful study of Morrison's fictional writings shows that the role of community in nurturing or challenging the individual is a motivating and organizing device in Morrison's fiction. Morrison revivifies the meaning of community in her works. Each of her novels continually focuses beyond the isolated, dystopian self toward the potentialities of a desired, collective self. Various socio-historic forces such as Slavery, Civil War, Migration, Depression and Racism have had deep impact on the black community life, an aspect which Morrison fully deals with in her novels.

What is the Community?

The community, in Morrison's fiction, means the actual or abstracted villages, compounds or enclaves in which black Americans used to live. Defined by personal rather than political relationships, it is made up of family and neighbors.

One finds that there exists a strong symbiotic relationship between family and community in Morrison's fiction. It was in her own family that Morrison was schooled about the

importance of a coherent community. For Morrison, community's involvement in anchoring the lives and experiences of the blacks can hardly be underestimated. Morrison learned early what it meant to live in an economically cooperative neighborhood. Her foundation and sense of self were strengthened by the cohesiveness of the small black Lorain community that parented and nurtured her for seventeen years.

In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison assets that her "tendency is to focus on neighborhoods and communities. And the community unity, the black community----was always there, only we called it 'neighborhood' that gave people life-giving, very very strong sustenance." She describes it as a place that cared if someone was 'put out' or 'put outdoors' where "people were taken care of ----if they were sick----if they were old----if they were mad" (Stepto:11).

Lives of Black Characters

In her fiction, Morrison shows the role that the black community plays in the lives of her characters. The community's values and beliefs shape the background against which the individual behavior is defined. Morrison reiterates that community and social organization for blacks is not a matter of convenience but of dire economic and spiritual necessity. She also validates the therapeutic role community plays to raise, protect and preserve a familial unit.

Morrison's praise for the community is, however, not unmixed; she castigates it severely when she finds that it has failed to play its cherished role. Her fictive world presents both the positive and negative ramifications of community's role in the lives of black Americans. The community both fosters and restricts its members. In the author's words, community is "both a support system and a hammer at the same time" (Smith:50).

Individual's Place in the Larger Community

Through her novels, Morrison is concerned with the individual's place in the larger community, concentrating on the relation between the pressures of the community, patterns established within families and the developing sense of self. She has, beginning with *The Bluest Eye*, been interested in the effect of community's acceptance or rejection of the individual. Her fiction expresses the complex dynamics of experience through which individuals are formed, or deformed by the often conflicting values of their respective communities.

The emotional reality of her characters may be understood as both a response to and a reflection of benign or destructive boundaries of community. In her early novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison examines the complex economic, historical, cultural and geographic factors that problematize her characters' relation within the black community and the world beyond.

The Bluest Eye

In *The Bluest Eye*, Lorain represents one of the northern urban communities reeling under the influx of southern migrants. Pauline and Cholly are immigrants from South, and are met with

ridicule and scorn by northerners who see their ignorant and unsophisticated ways as a threat to the tenuous racial stability. Their daughter, Pecola Breedlove, on whom the novel centers, typifies Morrison's outsiders because of her unattractiveness and color. Her story illustrates the destructive potential of a culture that recognizes only one standard of physical beauty and equates that standard with virtue.

Morrison shows how every segment of the black community in the novel is smitten by the aesthetics and beliefs they have adopted from an alien culture. The community continues to reject and avoid Pecola. Although the primary function of the black community is that of protecting its members Pecola's community fails her. In the end, Pecola is driven mad by her inability to possess blue eyes. But her insanity really results from the fact that she serves as the communal scapegoat, bearing not only her own self-loathing, but that of her neighbors and family as well.

Morrison concludes *The Bluest Eye* with Claudia's indictment of the society which "cleaned itself on Pecola". As the girl searches the garbage for "the things we assassinated," Claudia reflects that "this soil is bad for certain kind of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live"(*The Bluest Eye*:164).

***Sula* – Failure to Commit Oneself to Communal Responsibility**

In *Sula*, Morrison retrospectively presents the Bottom, a northern black community, geographically and socially isolated from the dominant culture. Here, time progression does not equate with social progression. Morrison recognizes the rich folk culture of the community but she is also keenly aware of the suffocating vacuum that keeps its people poor, neglected and loveless. Its member can unite only to make Sula, the protagonist of the novel, the convenient personification of evil, and thus, the focal point of a community in need of a common enemy.

Sula is again a scapegoat figure, a person shunned by the community, unable to connect fruitfully with the external world. She wants total freedom to live vitally, gratifying and observing her own impulses as she believes that she can create for herself an identity that exists beyond community and social expectations. Sula uses life as her medium, "exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (*Sula* : 118).

Worst of all in her neighbors' judgment, she discards men, black and white as rapidly as she sleeps with them, even the husband of her best friend, Nel. Moreover, Sula's lack of consideration for her grandmother, a neighborhood caretaker and the prototype of Morrison's nurturing mother figure, is underscored when she institutionalizes her in a nursing home.

Thus, Sula is unable to commit herself to a communal responsibility larger than her own concern, displacing herself—not only from her mother and her grandmother but also from the community" (Mori: 94) as is pointed out by Mori. Sula's parallel withdrawal from the community in her selfish quest for self-fulfillment culminates negatively in her death.

Song of Solomon

The protagonist of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* completes a heroic quest for an identity and place within the community. His story follows a cohesive of miraculous birth, youth, alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration into community.

The novel is Morrison's most positive depiction of the values of community as a crucial balance between individual liberation and reciprocal obligation. Milkman's conservative, middle class family which, like himself and his black community in Michigan, is fractured by the absence of a historical or cultural identity. But his journey to the rural south forces him to begin taking a more realistic view of the world around him. In the solitary wilderness of the woods in Shalimar, Milkman feels compelled to confront his essential identity, and his epiphany is the impetus for personal change and transcendence. He is suddenly wakened to his essential connection to other people.

In this spirit of collective identity, Milkman feels "a sudden rush of affection" and connection toward everyone he has known because like him, he realizes that in being forced to live unnatural lives, they, too, have been "maimed" and "scarred"(*Song of Solomon*:278). They all have been conditioned to live in isolation, alienation and denial. As his initiation signifies, it is the myth of brotherhood and belonging which ultimately springs from and illuminates reality. According to Patrick Bryce Bjork, Milkman's "reintegration into community depends upon his acceptance of individual relationships"(Bjork:109).

Tar Baby

Morrison's *Tar Baby* is set in the tropical Carribean, Isle des Chevaliers, which is a microcosm of modern society. Each character in the novel remains disconnected from identity, place and community. Jadine, the heroine of the novel, represents the Americanized brand of black youth who is far removed from her own family and community ties. Son, on the other hand, represents a typical African, full of community feelings. Son desperately tries to imbibe Jadine's community and family bonding by taking her to Eloe. Even though Son clearly claims Eloe as the source and roots of his being, there does not seem to be enough attraction in the community to maintain Son's sense of belonging. Like Jadine, he finds his people "stupid, backwoodsy, dumb dead" (*Tar Baby*:275).

The black community of Eloe that should have played a pivotal role in bringing the American black youth to the indigenous culture and heritage is unable to rise to the occasion since it is found to be parochial, backward and blindfolded. Morrison severally criticizes the black community for its failure to keep pace with the outside jet-set world. She concludes that Eloe is "rotten and more boring in –A burnt out place" (*Tar Baby*:262). The community finally fails to cement the bond between Son and Jadine.

Beloved

In *Beloved*, community underscores a radical redefinition of the emancipated blacks. In spite of suffering every indignity, the black community slowly coalesces.

A kind of linchpin in the Cincinnati community of the novel, Baby Suggs is the healer of the body collective who, by gathering her people at an isolated place by the river, can reconcile everyone with their individual hurts and, collective grievances. But the frailty of bonds forged among the members of this community is made apparent when they refuse to warn Baby Suggs of the arrival of slave catchers. They are envious of Baby Sugg's relative affluence and her position as the spiritual leader of the community. It was after all the local community's refusal to help Sethe that led to her act of infanticide.

Even Baby Sugg's iron will and faith in God are annihilated, not so much by the murder or by the white people, but by the community's lack of compassion and understanding. Communal solidarity was withheld from Sethe for nineteen years.

When Paul D seeks out Sethe, he takes Sethe and Denver out of isolation into society represented by the carnival. But Sethe and Denver are soon isolated again by Beloved, the ghost of Sethe's daughter. In the end, it is Denver who steps beyond the confines of 124 Bluestone Road and reaches out to the black community for help. She finds herself the recipient of communal love and kindness. The women of the town, with their powerful presence, save Sethe's life by exorcising the ghost of Beloved at the climatic conclusion of the novel. The exorcism saves the family from dissolution and initiates its members into the community.

Underlying Current - Potential for Cultural Regeneration

Thus, it is evident that Morrison's characters like Pecola, Sula, Pilate, and Jadine are unable to find and make a fully realized self in their communities because each has been in some way or the other, warped by communal circumstances. Yet, for each circumstance comes a measure of affirmation that points to the potential for cultural regeneration.

These characters acknowledge, however, vaguely, that they must search for identity by returning to the neighborhood and to the communal experience. They must do so in order as Morrison has said. "to survive whole in a world where (they) are all---victims of something" (Bakesman : 40). Thus, the community, for better or worse has the power to become the site of removal for its members. Their response to the call of communal experience determines forever their course in life.

It, however, goes to the credit of Morrison that she presents both the positive and negative aspects of the black community, which, in her opinion, has withheld itself from the outer world by its exclusive and backward nature. But, she, at the same time, reaffirms the significance of cultural heritage of the black community in the lives of black individuals and families.

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Colophon:

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Jyoti Deswal, Ph. D. Scholar
J J T University Chudela, Jhunjhunu
333001
Rajasthan
India
kuldip.dahiya@gmail.com