

Research Article

Negritude Plays a Prominent Role in Toni Morrison’s Novels: Analyzing *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*

Yamini P, K Poornima Varalakshmi, Sreela B, Prema S, Aruna Arputhamalar, R. Kalyana Sundaram

Abstract

The Nobel laureate and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Toni Morrison, was a giant in the history of literary sphere. Her novels were one of a kind and her influence extended well beyond her words written in her books. Morrison’s mesmerizing and bold novels about black history and identity crisis helped many other authors to venture into this forbidden world with a straightforward gait. Morrison’s novels scream about the advance issues of civil rights and racial justice.

Morrison’s novels, such as *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, elaborately describe the horrors and misconceptions that all dark-skinned individuals have to go through all their lives. In both these novels, we will see the protagonists breaking the stereotypical barriers to understand the aesthetics and beauty of their own culture. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is not at all concerned with the transformation of her black body to simply fall into the category of the white-skinned blue-eyed beauty. On the contrary, she is more interested in the process of perceiving beauty. According to her, that was the only way of bringing love to family. Similarly in the novel *Song of Solomon*, young black Milkman was interested in understanding his ancestor’s past and was keen to know more about the legend of the flying slaves who were able to go back to Africa.

In this article, I will explain the prominence of negritude which plays a significant role in Morrison’s two major novels—*The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. I will also discuss about the existential crisis and the inferiority complex that the characters faced throughout the novels due to the stifling racism that engulfed the world during the times of the World War II.

Keywords: *Negritude, Racism, Existential crisis, Alienation, Diaspora, Freedom*

¹Assistant Professor, Sri Sai Ram Institute of Technology, yamini.eng@sairamit.edu.in

²Assistant Professor, Sri Sai Ram Institute of Technology, poornima.eng@sairamit.edu.in

³Assistant Professor, Raja Lakshmi Institute of Technology, Assistant Professor, Chennai, India

⁴Assistant Professor, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai. India. premasubramanian08@gmail.com

⁵Assistant Professor, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai.India. arunaarputhamalar@veltech.edu.in

⁶Assistant Professor, VSB Engineering College, Karur, India.

Received Accepted

Introduction

“I am very happy to hear that my books haunt,” said Toni Morrison in interview with Nellie McKay.

Morrison with her vibrant novels brought out the racial horrors especially during the 1940s. In her novels, she described how mankind is plagued with the disastrous disease of meaningless racism where people are made to glorify only a single type of beauty that falls under the proper stereotypical westernized white-skinned beauty. Morrison had witnessed the horrors of racism and poverty since her childhood. When her father George Wofford was unable to pay the rent, their landlord set fire to their house. The horrors of that incident, which Morrison had to witness at the tender age of 2, engraved a deep scar within her heart. Her parents, Ramah and George, always tried to escape the horrors of racism to protect their beloved daughter. All throughout Morrison’s childhood, her parents tried to instill the essence of their native language and heritage in her by narrating traditional African-American ghost stories and folktales and singing songs of their land. When she enrolled in Harvard University to pursue BA in Arts, she faced racism first hand by encountering racially segregated buses and restaurants for the very first time. (Duvall)

Her life and experiences made her to stretch her hands toward unveiling the horrors of racism that has plagued the globe from time immemorial. Let me begin with *The Bluest Eyes*, the very first novel of this analysis. In this novel, we are introduced to Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, who clung on to the belief that having blue eyes will help her in escaping from the clutches of racism and endless torture—both mental and physical. After Pecola’s unstable, sexually abusive, and violent father Cholly burns down their house, Pecola had no other place to go than the MacTeer household as a foster child. There she met her foster sisters Claudia and Frieda who were the only ones who cared for her. All throughout her childhood, Pecola was haunted by the gruesome quarrels of her parents, which were violent both physically and verbally. (Bump)

Pecola was continuously reminded by the members of her neighborhood about her ‘ugly’ appearance. Thus Pecola began to harbor the delusion that having blue eyes will make her look beautiful. She knew that she won’t be able to change the color of her skin, but she wished for blue eyes at least, which will help her to get closer toward the westernized stereotypes. In one incident, we find Claudia destroying her white dolls due the hatred she has for white people which was completely contrary to Pecola’s desire of white beauty. This is because Claudia was brought up in a stable family where she was taught about her self-worth. Pecola on the other hand was always made to believe that her ugliness has doomed her to lead the life submission and slavery.

In Morrison’s other novel, *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist Milkman hails from a well-known family and is much loved by his family members. But he was utmost egotistical in his youth days and ends up hurting his family members leaving deep scars within their hearts. Milkman, just like Pecola, goes through a bildungsroman and grows up to become a compassionate adult. Morrison elaborates about why Milkman harbored such a rash personality during his youth. Milkman was

affected by the racist terrors that his ancestors had to put up with throughout their lives. Milkman's great grandfather Solomon was enslaved and escaped. This incident led Milkman's grandfather Macon Dead I to grow up as an orphan. Then Macon Jr, Milkman's father, witnesses his brutal murder by the white men. This traumatic incident transformed Macon Jr into a vicious man who was completely engulfed by greed and contempt. He raised his son himself and thus Milkman developed his father's characteristics. Thus Morrison brilliantly spun the story showing how the horrors of racism heavily affected the youth's selfish and rash behavior. Milkman had an undersized foot which added to his inferiority and alienation. He could mix well with the upscale parties, but he always felt alienated from his origin, his African-American heritage. He could find true solace only after traveling to the site of Solomon's flight toward freedom, Shalimar. (Morrison)

Existential crisis and deteriorating identity

Both Pecola and Milkman suffer from existential crisis and deteriorating identities. Pecola felt unwanted in each and every sphere of life. She was brutally raped by her father twice and he flees leaving her pregnant. One's home is where a person seeks shelter in times of crisis. But in Pecola's case her own house became a slaughterhouse for her. Her mother Pauline was unable to protect her or preferred neglecting her biological family to seek solace in the white-skinned family household where she worked. Staying in the westernized environment made her feel more sophisticated. Pecola was deprived of self-worth, self-esteem, and honor. She could only find solace in her delusion of acquiring blue eyes. Her alienation from her tradition and motherland made her an unwanted nobody. She only clung on to the hope that she will be able to attain respect in society if she could have blue eyes like the white-skinned masters and mistresses. (Wagner-Martin)

Pecola's father Cholly's madness and violent behavior is also reflected from his troublesome upbringing. He was rejected by both of his parents. His very first sexual encounter became a big joke when two white men caught him in the act and forced him to continue while they watched them disgusted. Cholly took out all his frustrations on his wife and daughter. Some critics say that he was only able to show affection through his madness as he never knew what true affection is all about. Pecola's mother too tried to escape her origin by running away in the shelter provided by her white employers. All the other characters also show signs of strong existential crisis all throughout the novel. Deterioration of their identities and unable to accept who they really are made them detached from the world as a whole. They are thrown out from their own origin and know they can never go back to Africa as they were already Americanized to a greater extent to forget their lifestyles. (Peach)

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman suffers from existential crisis, but he always wanted to fill the gap by revisiting his rich ancestral history. He was keener on fleeing like his grandfather. He held on to the false hope that he can only achieve freedom if he can travel back to his native land just like his grandfather. But Pilate, Milkman's aunt, on the contrary showed a different type of self-worth.

She can be referred to as the second protagonist of the novel. She showed her strength all throughout the story and no one could humiliate her even when she was a black woman, that is, dual suppression due to racism and patriarchy. She is the one who provides strength to Ruth, Reba, and Hagar—the other women characters of the novel. When Milkman went for the journey to know more about his family history and to understand great traditions of his origin, he found some children singing the ‘Song of Solomon’. Immediately he was remembered about a similar song that Pilate used to sing back in Michigan. Milkman began to piece together the lyrics of the song as a puzzle and understood that the song celebrates his heritage. He immediately understood what was missing from his quest of understanding his native land. (Bloom)

Diaspora, alienation, and freedom

Morrison’s novels elevate the concept of alienation that arises mainly due to the aftereffects of diaspora. The African-Americans reside in America, but their skin and physical features always remind them that their true origin is in Africa. None of the so-called white-skinned Americans will ever accept them as their own kind. The whites will continuously bully and make fun of them to remind them that they will always be inferior to the so-called upper-class white men. Pecola was deprived of every little happiness in life, even her child died being born prematurely. She had nothing left to her except her craving for blue eyes. She was driven to insanity which was the only way of receiving solace for her. When she looked at the others behaving strangely toward her, she firmly believed that it is because she was able to receive blue eyes. She did her best to forget that the people were behaving strangely because she was raped by her father and succumbed to insanity. She could never return to her motherland. To her the blue eyes were the only way of escape. (Bump)

But Milkman, on the contrary, understood that the horrors of alienation can be nullified with a strong will. He always thought of fleeing like his great grandfather. But when he was reminded of Pilate’s song after hearing the children singing ‘Song of Solomon’, he understood that Pilate has already attained freedom. She with her strength accepted her origin and was proud of it. She never had to flee somewhere to attain freedom. The moment she accepted her heritage, she was freed from all bonds. Milkman also wanted to do the same and thus occurred his transformation. From the selfish egotistical youth, he transformed into a compassionate adult and understood the blunders that he made and also his grave mistake that led to Hagar’s death. (Peach)

Critical analysis

Toni Morrison’s novels always have a mixture of several essences. Being an African-American woman and experiencing the modern and postmodern eras first-hand, he was heavily influenced by the treatment that the Black communities faced from all the other races. The blacks were always vehemently ill-treated especially by the white-skinned individuals who did not leave any chance of demeaning them and reminding them repeatedly that the blacks don’t belong in America. If they want to stay in the most advanced western country, they have to play the role of master and servant

and in the process the blacks are continuously reminded about their history of torture and slavery. In Morrison's novels, we always find basically three types of critical analysis perspectives: Euro-American, Afro-American, and Feministic. Critics since the beginning found the hints of all the cultural tastes in her books. As the years passed by, Morrison began to introduce white-skinned characters in her novels, which is considered by most critics as the author's maturity as a versatile writer. In *The Bluest Eyes*, Morrison's first novel, the protagonist Pecola was driven into insanity by the society. In the end she could only find solace by her delusion that she was able to achieve blue eyes as she desired for so long. At that moment, Pecola's foster sister Claudia also had an epiphany where she admitted that Pecola was the victim of the society as a whole. Claudia confessed that Pecola's insanity was not only caused by the ill treatment that she faced from the white-skinned individuals, but her deranged behavior went out of control because her own people abandoned her to make themselves feel better by sullyng Pecola and convincing her of her ugliness. (Staggers)

In Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*, we find a slightly different picture and the story seemed more mature as the characters showed a variety of other emotions. Here Milkman is not the only protagonist; his aunt Pilate can also be considered as a protagonist and she is shown as the symbol of strength and fearlessness. In this novel, Milkman found solace in tracing his rich cultural background. Milkman understood that his family history was much more elevated than any other white man's story. He took pride in being able to hail from such a rich heritage. Seeing Pilate's strength and believe in her own history, Milkman understood that freedom can be achieved if one can embraces his origin. He understood that Pilate was already free and she did not need to flee to Africa to seek for it. Pecola in *The Bluest Eyes* died the death of a tragic heroine. But Milkman in *Song of Solomon* could 'flee' as a brave hero. His spirit could soar up to the sky with head held high leaving behind all the filthy rules and regulations of the world. (Stein)

As years passed by, we find new hope in Morrison's novels. Her maturity grew with her novels and she introduced her rich heritage to the world at large. Her novels were heavily influenced by negritude, and she became one of the strongest voices to fight against the sufferings that the blacks have to go through even today.

Conclusion

From *The Bluest Eyes* and *Song of Solomon*, we get a wider picture of Morrison's life. As we know, Pecola's father burned down their house. In Morrison's life, she too had to face such a terrifying experience when their landlord burned their house as her father was unable to pay the rent. Again we see that Macon Dead II, Milkman's father, was horrified by being the witness of his father's brutal murder by white men. If we read Morrison's life story, we will find that her father George Wofford was scarred at the age of 15 when he witnessed the killings of two black businessmen by the white people. Morrison said about her father in an interview, "He never told us that he'd seen bodies. But he had seen them. And that was too traumatic, I think, for him." (Middleton)

In this article, I discussed the horrors of negritude that was portrayed in Toni Morrison's novels; the two major novels of this article were *The Bluest Eyes* and *Song of Solomon*. I have analyzed the different situations and scenarios that the dark-skinned individuals face all throughout their lives. The inferiority complex that is hurled toward them by the society drives them to suffer from existential crisis, feeling of alienation, and craving for freedom. Morrison in all her novels gave the message that freedom can be achieved only if one is strong enough to accept oneself as they are. No one needs to change or cling on to the false elevation of western beauty and classiness. One can be relieved from the cursed bondage of the world if one knows how to possess self-worth. Negritude had always played a prominent part in all her novels. But throughout the years of her writing career, Morrison was able to show the world how horrors are inflicted on humans by humans themselves. Morrison elaborately narrated the horrors that racism has wreaked havoc all around the globe. The author's only intention was to demonstrate the futility of discrimination among each other on the basis of trivial issues of caste, creed, and skin tone. (Jones)

Reference

- Bloom, Harold. *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publications, 1999.
- Bump, Jerome. "Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism." *College Literature* (2010): 147–170.
- Duvall, John N. *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.
- Jones, Donna V. *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Middleton, David L. (Editor). *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. Philadelphia: Routledge, 1999.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- Peach, Linden. *Toni Morrison*. London: Red Globe Press, 1998.
- Prema, S., Ramesh Kumar, S. Breaking The Silence To Accentuate Ostracism: An Audacious Response of Anupama, *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering*, Vol. 9, Iss. 1, pp. 2098–2100, 2019.
- Prema, S., Theporal, S., and Abharam, M. Ill effects of bipolar depression: A scrutiny of Preeti Shenoy's fictional chronicle, *European Journal of Molecular and Clinical Medicine*, Vol. 7, Iss. 3, pp. 4961–4964, 2020.
- Staggers, Leroy. "The critical reception of Toni Morrison: 1970 to 1988" (1989). ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library, n.d.
- Stein, Karen F. *Reading, Learning, Teaching Toni Morrison: 10 (Confronting the Text, Confronting the World)*. USA: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2009.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Toni Morrison and the Maternal*. USA: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2019.