

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

**Vol. 9 Issue 1 February 2023**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

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(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com) ISSN: 2395-4132



## **TONI MORRISON'S ETHNIC CULTURAL FEMINIST CELEBRATING THE UNIQUE FEMININE CULTURAL VALUES IN HER FICTION: AN APPRAISAL**

**J. B. JOSHIHA BELL**

**Ph.D. Scholar (Reg. No: Mku22ffol10573)**

**Department of English & Comparative Literature**

**Madurai Kamaraj University**

**Madurai, Tamil Nadu**

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### **Abstract**

African-American Literature deals with racism, identity crisis, feminism and ethnicity. Many American-African writers have written their works on such themes. Toni Morrison is one of these American-African writers. This research paper intends to analyse how Toni Morrison is part and parcel of a long black and American literary tradition that finds its full and complicated bloom in her art by producing, viewing and making her novels as multi-voiced, multilayered, writerly and speakerly, both popular and literary highbrow, thereby taking the novel home to the intimate address of the rural and urban African-American tradition from which she came back to the blues with its long standing tradition of voicing pain, registering complaint and comfort. It neatly studies how 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 exposing the damages that sexist oppression, both inside and outside of the ethnic group has had on black women and picturizes how Toni Morrison's aim is to understand embrace and advocate Pan-Africanism; the total liberation and unification of Africa under scientific socialism.

### **Keywords**

African-American Literature, Toni Morrison, Liberation, Feminism, Class, Race, Ethnicity, Socialism, Struggle, Individualism.

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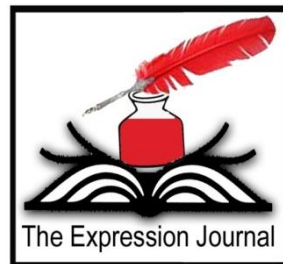
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Toni Morrison is part of a long black-and American-literary tradition that finds its full and complicated bloom in her art. Her novels are multi voiced, multi layered, writerly and spakerl, both popular and literary highbrow. No doubt, Morrison takes the novel home to the intimate address of the rural and urban African - American tradition from which she came back to the blues with its longstanding tradition of voicing pain, registering complaint and comfort. She has increasingly committed herself to addressing issues of race outsider her own fiction. Generally speaking, Morrison is said to have undertaken the task of showing that "Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness - from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrated twentieth - century self". In the national Canonial literature, Morrison discovers "a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphysical but always chocked representation of an Africanist Presence". Both black feminist critics and teachers of literature find in her a story black feminist voice for Morrison herself has played an active role in promoting black voices. As editor at Random House, she ensured that black writers would find a receptive space in publishing, that the integrity of their voices would not be compromised by the imposition of alien standards.

Toni Morrison once said that she "never planned to be a writer" (Backerman 18). The closest her ambition took her to a creative life was an early dream of becoming a dancer. But her destiny was writing, even if she didn't know it for a long time. Finally, in her late thirties, she found that writing was "not only pleasurable but also necessary for her" (Carmean 1). Internationally, Toni Morrison is part of a growing body of contemporary writers who are responding to imperatives of cultural. Critique, reclamation and redefinition - imperatives broadly termed 'post colonial'. Helen Tiffin defines the "dismantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority "along with the endeavor to "define a denied or outlawed self" as one of the main decolonizing endeavours of post colonial literatures. N'gugi defines decolonization as "a quest for relevance". Wherein the emphasis is interior, directed toward

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post colonial society rather than outwardly toward the colonizer. Morrison's creative project has an affinity with the work of decolonization undertaken by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe.

On February 18, 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in the windy little steel mill town of Lorain, Ohio. Her father, George was a shipyard welder from Georgia. Her mother, Ramah Willis Wofford, came from Alabama. Her father grew up in Georgia amidst the lynchings of young black men. That left him with a serious lack of affection for white folks. "People assume that a racist is a white person that doesn't like black people", says Morrison. Her father had left Georgia because of racist atrocities which haunted him all his life. Thus, he became a racist himself, believing he was justified in hating all whites, and holding out no hope, that the general lot of his people would improve in this country. Her mother by contrast, was for more optimistic, believing that faith and individual effort could change conditions.

Early in her life, Morrison was encouraged to read. As a result, by the time she entered the first grade, the only member of her race in the class, she was the only child who could read and understand things so quickly. For the rest of her school years, she remained studious and her academic accomplishments grew. In 1949, she graduated with honors from Lorain high School. By then, she had developed a great passion for reading literature. Jane Austen, Gustav Falubert and the great nineteenth century Russian novelists in particular had captured her imagination. "The books", she recalls, "were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway - they spoke directly to me out of their own specificity" (Burns 74). Thus, she adds,

"When I wrote my first novel years later  
I wanted to capture that some specificity  
about the nature and feeling of the culture  
I grew up in." (Strouse 54)

Among black women, who have historically suffered oppression because of both race and gender, there is usually a simultaneous concern for both these issues. They abhor both sexist and racist oppression. But because of their minority ethnic status, which keeps their allegiance to ancestral group foremost, most shun an advocacy of the kind of political, existential feminism embraced by many women of the majority culture. For black women, their concern with feminism is usually more group - centred then self-centered, more cultural than political. As a result, they tend to be more concerned with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. They advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism. And in doing so, they are able to address the rights and values of women without separating themselves from an allegiance to their ethnic group. 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 group, has had on black women but she does not allow these negatives to characterize the whole of their experience. Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of their oppression.

While a black feminist point of view is clearly evident in Toni Morrison's work, it is always contextual and relational, articulated with respect to issues of class and community. While the white-identified individualism of her male and female bourgeois characters is historical and located within social relations of power and desire, narrative effect is usually on the side of those who are subordinated to bourgeois power. Morrison's novel may be read as

anti-Bildurg project that subvert dominant middle-class ideology. The Bluest Eye, an indictment of racism, is also a stinging critique of an educated class of blacks who, in order to avail themselves of the bourgeois privileges of a capitalist economy, have made “individuals” of themselves. In an interview, Morrison said:

“.....black people have always been used  
as a buffer in this country between  
powers to prevent class war, to prevent  
other kinds of real conflagrations” (Goyal 48)

Morrison’s literary project involves confronting the national chasms of race, class and gender as they are lived by individuals. Her novels tend the gap between emergent middle-class black America and its subaltern origins; she has called her work “peasant literature for my people”. Morrison’s childhood was not primarily dominated by black responses to white oppression. In fact, in Lorain, where everyone was poor, neighbourhoods were less rigidly segregated than in many parts of the country, and even racial hostility was not prevalent. Memorable are her recollections of the richness of black love, black music, black myths and the cultural rituals her family and community. She has to her credit publication of such notable novels as 1. *The Bluest Eye*, 2. *Sula* 3. *Song of Solomon* 4. *Tar Baby* 5. *Jazz* 6. *Beloved*, of all novels, *The Bluest Eye* makes one of the most powerful attacks yet on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women. *Percola* Bread love’s predicament as the young black girl who feels that blackness condemns her to ugliness and lovelessness, is not only a problem for black girls and women. Morrison makes this clear in an expose of the “ugliness” of black poverty, powerlessness and loss of positive self-concept in this poignant haunting, poetic narrative.

*Suba*, a novel about black women’s friendships and about good and evil, not only breaks with popular stereotypes of black women in western literature but creates one of the few black women heroines to deliberately embrace the role of a pariah *Sula* had, though not universal liked, a wider reception than *The Bluest Eye* and brought national recognition than *The Bluest Eye* and brought national recognition and *Song of Solomon* changed Toni Morrison’s public reputation from aspiring novelist to outstanding American writer. The power of novel lies in Morrison’s black mythology and the strength of its elements of black culture. Unlike her previous books, *Tar Baby* is set in the French West Indies, outside of the predominantly black community and outside of the borders and protections of life in the United States. It is her first book in which white people as Central actors.

Toni Morrison, no doubt, as black women writer, had put Lovain, Ohio on the literary map raised the currency of black women writers in American literature and was an American writer of international fame. After the publication of *Tar Baby* in 1981, Toni Morrison achieved the ultimate sign to success in America. Toni Morrison’s fiction makes us re-evaluate individuals via the complex socio-political history that bespeaks them. Her novels aim at redistributing the pressure accountability from the axis of the individual to that of the collective. As an American novelist within the American literary tradition, Morrison interrogates national identity and reconstructs social memory. Since her most recent novels emphasize the history of blacks systematically victimized by whites, some critics have decided that Morrison has taken a turn towards political writing. The fact is that politics isn’t a new aspect in her novels. Politics just plays a more obvious role in *Beloved* and *Jazz* because of their subject matter and the nature of the stories. In earlier novels, Morrison would “The work must be political, she has said. “It must have that as its thrust. That’s a pejorative term in critical

circles now; if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow its tainted, My feeling in just the opposite ; it it has none, it is tainted..... The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (Otten 139).

Morrison is especially concerned with sexual politics as they affect black women. She continually shows how sexist behaviour, both in and out of the bounds of the black community, can be an oppressive force. Significantly, though she avoids trying to present some kind of revolutionary solution, and never slides into problems on the subject Her role, as she sees it, is instead to celebrate the unique black woman have managed to develop in the hostile environment of while America. In her youth, she learned to respond to the strong women and folk arts of their original culture; and in her maturity, she has felt the obligation to sustain at least their memory.

Toni Morrison has been a consistently insightful and helpful critic of her work with regard to her first novel, she has indicated that her plan was to take love and the effects of its scarcity in the world as her major themes” (Bakesman 60) concentrating those of an enclosed community (110). Her aim is to show how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something” (60). Morrison’s broad vision extends beyond the individual to one that explores self-discovery in relation to a shared history” (Russell 44). Survival, a theme running throughout Morrison’s fiction, is difficult for the strongest of her characters. For eleven year old Pecola Breedlove, the focal character of *The Bluest Eye* discovering a means to affirm her own identity is thwarted at every turn. An innocent and Convenient fiction of her community’s frustration, anger, ignorance, and shame, when raped by her father, gives birth to a skill born child and escapes her sense of ugliness into madness, Convinced that she has magically been given blue eyes. Morrison’s title, like her point of view, has multiple significance. Most obviously, the title refers to Pecola’s cancer Most obviously, the title refers to Pecola’s only desire in life; to have the bluest eyes;

Pecola’s only response to her father’s act in the hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon suggesting the vacuum chilly leaves behind (128). Though Cholly is responsible for his actions, he merely serves as the instrument of a culture which values females primarily for their beauty and then assess their work according to narrow racist standards.

After completing *Sula*, Morrison says” she know she as a writer” And as an indicator of talent, depth and stylistic innovation, *Sula* assures Morrison’s literary reputation. Superficially the novel *Sula* seems to be a continuation of themes and structures introduced in *The Bluest Eye*. Again Morrison uses paired female characters: themes of identity love and responsibility: a vivid sense of community; shifting narrative perspectives; and rich use of irony and paradox. Morrison have dramatizes her talent for using language as both indicator and mask” (110). *Sula* insists that readers put raise conventionally expectations to enter a fictional world deliberately inverted to reveal a complex reality, a world in which evil maybe a necessary good, where good may be exposed for its inherent evil, where murder and self-mutilation became acts of love and where simple answers to ordinary human problems do not exist. *Sula*’s energy and intelligence go unrecognized and unemployed, ignored by a community too busy foisting its guild and failure on her. This is distressing, as is the fact that *Sula* cannot overcome overwhelming odds to discover the necessary form of self-expression. Here, then, is an example of true evil in the story. Without *Sula* upon whom to focus blame, the people of the Bottom shift to a tunnel part of a local federally funded road project which has raised and then

frustrated resident's hope for employment. Here we see further examples of evil in the forms of sexism and racism.

The struggle for self-development leads some Africans to see themselves in isolation protected, nurtured and guided them. This selfish quest for individual fulfillment is certainly that of Sula not responsible individualism, but here is "a socially disintegrative version of individualism, that possessive individualism or sanctified rapacity which is extolled by capitalist societies" (*The Bluest Eye* 24). By the time she wrote *Song of Solomon*, Morrison was "fully conscious of the relationship between the individual African and his community". In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison subordinates sexism to both racism and capitalism, realizing that the exploitation of the African women by the African man is the result of his national and class oppression. Class struggle, the struggle between the ruling class and the subject class is the thematic emphasis of Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby*. Racism, the primary focus of *The Bluest Eye*, is viewed as a coequal but consequential cause of the African's oppression. The struggle between the sexes, having been explored in *Sula* and resolved in *Song of Solomon*, gets little of the author's attention for Morrison has sufficiently matured to understand that the fundamental cause of the African's oppression is the exploitive economic system of capitalism and its overseas extension, imperialism. Thus, racism and sexism, though equally oppressive are treated as by-products of capitalism. To eradicate the latter ensures the eradication of the former two. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison's increased consciousness is reflected in her ability and commitment to explore this cause and effect relationship between class, race and sex. Unlike Pecola Breedlove, who struggles with the question of racial approbation, Sula, who struggles against the traditional role of Arcian women and Milkmen, who individually struggles with the issue of race and class, the two protagonists in *Tar Baby* struggle together to resolve their opposing class interests in order to unite" (Mbalia 68). To conclude, Toni Morrison's aim is to understand, embrace and advocate Pan-Africanism, the total liberation and unification of Africa under scientific socialism.

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