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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Toni Morrison's Contribution and A Representative of Afro-American Race

Gowher Ahmad Naik

Research Scholar of Phd at Lovely Professional University

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### Abstract

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#### \*Corresponding Author

Gowher Ahmad Naik

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Toni Morrison was born as Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931. She was the second daughter of Ramah and George Wofford who belonged to a working class family. Her father was from Georgia and her mother was from Alabama. They worked under sharecropping policy. Due to certain circumstances, they lost their land and it turned their life complicated. When they could not stand anymore, they migrated to North. Morrison's father was contemptuous against white race from her childhood. This was the main reason for their family to move towards North. Her father was a dedicated personality. Through his efforts he brought them out from miseries of life. Simultaneously, he took three jobs for the survival of his family.

Toni was nurtured in an environment where there was a strong animosity between blacks and whites. This is clearly visible in her novels. In her childhood, she had a strong bond with her community. Dr. Chakranarayan says, "She was brought up as many in such migrant families were, with a strong distrust of whites and an understanding that the only tangible or emotional aid on which she could depend would come from the community" (30). The truths about life she learnt from her grandparents. The black culture was meticulously adopted by her family. She added a life line to this cultural heritage through her vivid depiction of life. Her parents loved their children and there was a firm knot between the family members. "It was at her parents knees that she heard tales of Brer Rabbit and of the African who could fly, heard the names, the imaginary, the rhythm of the language and observed the naming rituals that would become a significant part of her later work as a novelist" (Chakranarayan 31). She is a multi-facet personality. She came across renowned personalities and examined their works. "People were", she told Le Chair. "It seems to me there were more excesses in women and men, and people accepted them as they don't know. In the community where I grew up there was eccentricity and freedom, less conformity in terms of the survival of the village, of the tribe" (Chakranarayan 31). Her childhood life was loaded with African American folklore, music, myths, and rituals. Morrison says, Her family was "intimate with the supernatural" (Encyclopedia of World Biography). They forecast the future with the help of visions and signs. Telling stories was a vital element of their life. Both children as well as adults were involved in storytelling. Storytelling sowed the first seed of narrative in Morrison. Childhood memories provided her a benchmark in her writing. From her childhood, she had a strong inclination towards books. She loved to read the books of Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy and the 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer Gustave Flaubert. These writers influenced Morrison's style of writing. She did her B. A. from Howard University in English in 1953. Cornell University conferred on her Master of Arts in English in 1955. She produced a thesis on the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. She has taught at Texas Southern University in

Houston, Texas (1955-57) as an English teacher. She married Harold Morrison in 1958. The marriage did not last long and they broke up in 1964. Civil Rights Movement was in progress during 1960's and Morrison met many personalities like poet Amiri Baraka and Andrew Young. Then, she began working as a text editor in Syracuse, New York. Later, she shifted to New York City, which was the headquarters of Random House and worked there as an editor. With the editorial job, Morrison provided a new outlook to the black literature to bring it to the forefront. She has edited the books of Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones.

She began her literary career as a fictional writer. Her first novel was an outcome of a short story. It was a story of a girl who has strong desire to have blue eyes. Not so late, this story turned into her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). This novel specifically deals with racism, incest and child molestation. Her second novel *Sula* is the story about two adult black women who have intimate friendship. This novel portrays the way Afro-American women battles against their own communities as well as white communities. Morrison questions the accepted notions of good and bad. Are these concepts indefinable? Next novel *Song of Solomon* which she published (1977) brought her national fame and outlook. This novel is about the male passion. She has interlinked generations together in this novel. At the end, the novel provides us a message about hope, peace and salvation. This novel emphasized on the forefather black cultural heritage. The way black people struggle to develop their own communities, schools, businesses, etc. and look back towards their past, its history, myths, and folklore. *Tar Baby* was brought out in 1981. This novel investigates the issues such as race, class and sex. *Beloved* her masterpiece appeared in 1987. The narrative is based on the real life story of a slave girl Margaret Garner. To save her children from pain of slavery, she fled along with her children to Ohio from her master in Kentucky (1851). She murdered one of her children and was punished for her crime. In response, she boldly said that she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done. Morrison composed *Beloved* "because slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue. She had nothing left to make a living with but her heart which she put to work at once" (*Beloved* 102). *Jazz* was produced in 1992. It focuses on the America of 1920's. It was followed by *Paradise* in 1997. It explicates the brutal act, a group of people make on a female community near the town. Her another literary blow *Love* came in 2003. This novel throws light on the life and love at the time of 1940's and 1950's on a black seaside resort. It was followed by *A Mercy* (2008) and then *Home* (2012). Her inaugural play, *Dreaming Emmett* performed in 1986. It is a story of a black boy who is blamed of irritating a white woman and is assassinated. This is a real life incident happened in 1955. It became a center point of Civil Rights Movement. They raised voices against this heinous and inhuman act. Through this Morrison gave a message that black Americans also possess human qualities. They are not inhuman beings. It was succeeded by *Desdemona* first performed in 15 May, 2011 in Vienna. Her works on criticism *Playing in the Dark*, *Whiteness* and *The Literary Imagination* were produced in the year 1992. She added the following non-fictional works to her name like, *Race-ing*, *Justice*, *Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and The Construction of Social Reality* (1992), *Birth of a Nationhood* (1997), *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (April 2004), etc. In, *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison illuminated that American literature is biased. It is a literature of white people. Even interpreters have bypassed the position of African Americans. In this book the Eurocentric perspectives about blacks have been vividly described. Her debut children's book *The Big Box* came into the market in 1999. It was a joined effort of both Morrison and her son Slade. The book portrays the way adults become obstruction for children's independence and creativity. After this, she released two more children's literary books with her son Slade Morrison which are as: *The Book of Mean People* (2002), *Peeny Butter Fudge* (2009). All of Morrison's novels focus exclusively of African life. *Beloved* too, is strongly coloured in this tendency. Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved* is a tragic story of a girl about her life after slavery. The Noble Committee quoted *Beloved* as a prestigious work of Morrison. This is basically a real life event of a Kentucky girl who murdered her own daughter. She did this to save her daughter from the horror of slavery. Before she was caught she did this act. The novel highlights the brutality and cruelty of slavery institutions. It also presents the way past sway the slaves even after their freedom. It is abundant with ghosts. Not only in the sense that the title character is a supernatural, but the ghostly memories of servitude that still haunted Sethe and Paul D. The novel shows us the picture of Sethe, the way she strives and elopes from the Sweet Home. She wants to live with her children and get rid of this miserable, uncomfortable life and live a life which is full of pleasure and freedom. Due to rage she killed one of her daughter when slave master arrived to recapture them back. The novel exposed wickedness and violence of slavery. The two horrible incidents which happened with Sethe and turned her life into hell are: At Sweet Home, Sethe was sexually molested by the sons of master in the barn field. Sethe felt irritated when her milk was stolen from her breasts by the nephews of Schoolteacher. This incident especially haunted Sethe more. She had kept this milk for her children. This exhibit the way slavery creates rift between mothers from their children and demolished their stability. It shattered the peace of her mind. Despite this,

it shows motherly love towards her children. For Sethe death for her children is a better fortune than the life of slavery. This forces her to do such a brutal act of infanticide. Sethe bore the immense pain of the death of her child but not to give up her to slavery. It displayed the true love of a mother for her children.

The novel specifically deals with the horror of slavery. It is a tussle between present and past lives of slavery. It presents a message to the black community. Besides, they dwell in the past of slavery. They should learn a lesson from it to confront the future. It also throws light on the three most horrible tortures subjected to blacks i.e. racism, sexism and classicism.

Ochoa views that groups which are counted as other are marginalized. It is a discourse created by the society and is not checked. It is visible at the novel's opening epigraph in *Beloved* "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" (*Beloved*).

The real life events which happened with her, she has brought them into picture in her novels. She has visited many times to South. There she became conscious of the problems these black people confront. Morrison has interdisciplinary approach. Her novels are packed with all the aspects of life like cultural, political, religious, historical, social, and psychological. Almost all, her novels touched the aspects of racial identity, cultural conflict and class consciousness. It was because, she wants to provide black life an identity at national level. Morrison's slave stories pinpoint the subjugated place of African Americans in society. In her novels, she had represented black cultural heritage. It has been articulated about the black women writers:

Being both black and female, these writers write from a vantage point. They project their vision of the world society, community family, their lovers, even themselves-most often through the eyes of black female characters and poetic personae. Their angle of vision allows them to see what white people, especially the males, fail to see. (Chakranarayan 26)

Her works are called as "Laboratory Narratives" (Chakranarayan 26). They portray the life of black women realistically. Even her novels are counted among historical novels. The characters in her novels are from the real life incidents. She gave them a place in her novels. Morrison investigated the inner psyche of her characters. Her writing provided a new look to black women. She tried to break the myths and stereotypes about the black woman.

Morrison's tireless research and deep insight into black life earned a respectable place in academics. She was a visiting lecturer at Yale University in New Haven Connecticut (1976-1977). She was elected to the Albert Schweitzer chair at the University at Albany, The State University of New York in 1983. She held the Robert F. Goheen Chair in the Humanities at Princeton University between 1989 till her retirement in 2006. She is a maiden African American writer who holds a chair at Princeton University.

Her works have drawn wide public attention and won awards for their great merit and value. Her novel *Sula* was awarded with the National Book Award. Her next novel *Song of Solomon* received the National Book Critics Circle Award and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award (1977). This book was picked as the second novel from an African American writer for Book of the Month selection. *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the American Book Award (1988). An upturn came in the life of Morrison when she was tagged with The Noble Prize in 1993. On the day of Noble Prize the Noble Committee says: Toni Morrison, "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (Answers). She is the first Afro-American woman who has been labeled with this honor. She was chosen for the Jefferson Lecture by the National Endowment for the Humanities which is the U. S. Federal Governments highest privilege for success in the humanities. She warns the people against the wrong use of history to save their future hopes. In 1996 she was privileged with the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters which is given to a writer "who has enriched our literary heritage over a life of service or a corpus of work" (Encyclopedia). Morrison was conferred with National Arts and Humanities Award by President Bill Clinton in Washington, D. C. The president gave a speech and said, Morrison had "entered Americans heart" (Encyclopedia of World Biography). Barnard College acclaimed her by its supreme privilege, the Barnard Medal of Distinction at commencement ceremonies. The Oxford University offered her an honorary Doctor of Letters Degree in June 2005. Morrison was granted an Honorable Doctor of Letters Degree from Rutgers University during commencement (2011). In the same year, she got Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Geneva. There she gave a speech about "Pursuit of life, Liberty, Meaningfulness, Integrity, and Truth" (Encyclopedia). On 29 May, 2012, she was bestowed with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. At present she has the membership of the editorial board of *The Nation Magazine*.

To sum up, Toni Morrison is categorized among the great legends of literary history. Her greatness lies in her novels. Through her art she promoted the African literary black tradition. Her style of writing is poetic in

nature. This adds grace and eloquence to her writing. Being a black feminist writer her approach is for equitable access both for women as well as for men. As a passionate and energetic writer, she enlightened the cultural heritage of black people. Her interdisciplinary quality foregrounds her concerns. To a great extent, she has been successful in arousing the sympathy and support of the world for the blacks. She is rightly called a representative of her race.

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