THE ALIENATED HEROINES IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

How a writer should be? Always remembered, a wonderful teller of stories, wholeheartedly in love with her people, creating memorable heroines and heroes and making them breathe. Toni Morrison justifies the above said qualities and she deserves to be called as one of the most prolific contemporary black writers. She has always been concerned about the unique positions of black women in American life and literature. Morrison deals with varied themes and this paper deals with one particular theme; alienation. The heroines are usually alienated from their family, friends, and society and even from their own self. This alienation turns the heroines either to madness or death. Morrison clearly depicts this in all of her novels. This particular paper deals with the two memorable heroines of Morrison: Pecola of The Bluest Eye and Sula of Sula. This also elucidates how both the heroines travel their journey of life and meet their tragic end after a strong and long struggle from people.

KEYWORDS: Writer, Themes, Alienation, Toni Morrison, Madness, Tragedy.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison has distinguished herself as an author, editor and critic who has transformed the American Literary landscape with her presence in the Afro American Literary tradition. In her novels she established herself as one of Americans leading fiction writer, gifted and popular story teller. Her novels have attracted both popular and critical attention for their inventive blend of realism, Social analysis, passionate and philosophical concerns. The characters in her novel struggle to expose the fault lines of a society built on racial prejudice. In her characterization she accentuates initially the extreme difference in Afro American culture.
In all the novels of Toni Morrison, one can feel the overwhelming power of the writer as a teller of stories. Toni Morrison attracts, impresses the reader by her depiction of relationships between women. No major writer has dealt with this theme. Here Morrison feels that:

\[ \text{Relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing. This is not true of men (Tate 1983:118).} \]

Morrison deals with the themes of love, quest for identity, beauty, ugliness, friendships, alienation and deaths. This paper deals with the theme of alienation. Alienation confirms devastating for black women in white America. Migrated from their motherland, caught in the iron chains of slavery, black women were reduced to the roles of breeder, maid and domestic and other such menial roles. Thus, they have suffered the most brutal form of racism and sexism which results in their distinctive excruciating alienation. The black women writers struggled to overcome from the shackles of the white society. Their critical condition made them to write. Morrison proves, “Black women writers write primarily for themselves, as a means of understanding their experiences and observations, and as a means of discovering deeply hidden truths about themselves as well as others” (Tate 1984:60)

This paper deals with the two prominent heroines of Morrison: Pecola from The Bluest Eye and Sula from the novel Sula.

Pecola of The Bluest Eye is alienated in many ways. To acquire ‘Blue Eyes’ she undergoes many worst hurdles. Very few acknowledged her: her three friendly prostitutes, China, Poland and Miss Marie, who live in the upstairs apartment, and by benevolent Claudia and her sister Frieda. No one in Lorain motivates or reassures Pecola of her self worth. Instead, whenever she interrelates with, serves only to strengthen her self-image of insignificance. Hence, she is alienated from her parents, classmates as well as the Lorain people because of her negative self-image.

Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother also experiences alienation. Pauline works as a housemaid in a wealthy lakeshore home. Her own kinky hair and decayed tooth makes her to feel isolated at work. Neither in her childhood nor at this age, she felt at home and experienced a sense of belonging to any place. Her persistent general feeling was that of “separateness” and “unworthiness”. Even though she worked with white people, she didn’t love like them. This tragic alienation of Pauline Breedlove has a dire influence on her role as a mother. Toni Morrison clearly states that Pauline never loves or tries to acquire a positive relationship with her daughter, instead she nurtures love to her employer’s child. It can be said that she is compassionate and showers gentleness and love to her employer’s child and rains aggression and derision on her own. Pecola addresses her own mother as Mrs. Breedlove, which is the very formal way of addressing one’s mother and thus Pecola is alienated from her own mother, Pauline. It is clearly seen that the intimate feeling of mother-daughter relationship is lacking between Pauline and Pecola in the novel. Pecola seclusion from other members of her family and her friends at school is increased by problem of appearance and self-image.

Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye is about the quest for obtaining a positive identity as a black person separate from the confusion that white is what is beautiful. The story is about
Pecola, the black girl who longs to have a bluest dye. She is abused and unloved. She is raped by her own father and beaten. Her whole identity is tarnished by the thought that in order for her to have beauty she has to be white. She wishes she had blue eyes like white girls. Her idea of beauty is also exacerbated by the kids at school who refer to the light skin girl in her school as being the most beautiful black girl. She creates an imaginary friend with blue eyes. Contrasted against Pecola’s feelings of inadequacy for being black is Claudia. Claudia has a loving mother who helps her to have a feeling of self worth. She does not want to succumb to the idea of White as being the only beauty and she demonstrates this by destroying her white dolls. Here Pecola is alienated even from her self beauty.

Whatever Pecola expects, ends in vain. She desperately wants to be liked, to be accepted. Being a black girl in a society where white-skinned, blue-eyed beauties are idolized, Pecola things she is ugly. She hates herself so much that she stares at herself in the mirror trying to figure out where her ugliness comes from. The novel suggests that Pecola’s yearning for beauty is a result of her feeling that people do not see her. She is amendable to everything. But, then, no one even her friends started disliking her after the terrible incident where she was raped by her own father. The sympathetic friendly pair of sisters is distanced from her. Frieda and Claudia see Pecola sometimes after Pecola lapses into madness:

After the baby came too soon and died …. She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright. (Morrison 1970:158)

Pecola’s alienation is complete when she retreats into her own world of madness in which she imagines that she was not raped by her own drunken father, and creates her own imaginary friend who is the sole reassurance for her. This newly-won friend assures that Pecola has a beautiful blue eyes. Pecola’s deranged nerves say a lot about the socio-economic and political oppression of little black girls as they get alienated from black and white America.

Like Pecola, Sula is also alienated in many ways. Sula and Nel are good friends. Toni Morrison illustrates the friendship between Sula and Nel in this novel. They are

solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into techni-colored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream (Morrison 1982:51)

Hannah, Sula’s mother never pays attention to her only daughter’s yield for emotional nurture. Hannah simply refuses to live without the support of man. After her husband’s death, she takes a steady sequence of lovers. Sula once hears Hannah saying, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (Morrison 1986: 57). This makes Sula, a daughter of an inaccessible mother and turns her attention to Nel. Helene Sabat, Nel’s mother is class conscious and precise about her manners. She manoeuvres her daughter and husband. She grows Nel as an obedient and sincere daughter crushing all her imagination into pieces. Both the mothers Pauline in “The Bluest Eye” and Helene in “Sula” mangles their daughter’s imagination into dull glow. Thus Sula and Nel are alienated from their own mothers.
Both Sula and Nel are single children to their parents. Sula’s father is dead and Nel’s father, Wiley Wright’s presence is hardly felt in the family. This affects Nel’s growth severely. All these situations depicts that Sula and Nel are sailing in the same boat, complementing and resembling each other in their emotional isolation from other people. Though Sula and Nel belong to different backgrounds, yet something alike in them made them to become closer to their hearts:

Each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on … they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for (ibidem:52)

Once again Sula’s emotions are tested. She suffers extreme isolation after the accidental drowning of her playmate, Chicken Little. Sula is obsessed with guilty conscious after that incident throughout her life which does not permit her a relief.

Sula learns that: “there was no other that you could count on;…” and “…there was no self to count on either”(Morrison 1982:118-119) from the two important experiences, Hannah’s remark and Chicken Little death. She is not like other common girl who has ambition, affection, desires, and property. Hence her isolation is deeper. She is kept aside by the black women of Bottom as she refuses to marry a man and to beget children.

Both Sula and Nel develop a spiritual bond with each other as no one cares or gives time to these girls’ emotional needs. But their friendship does not last long. Sula “had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both as other and a self” (Morrison 1986:108) but she and Nel are not same and one thing. When Sula hears of Nel marriage to Jude Green, she is alienated from her. Nel becomes the third person or another person in the society to Sula. After her marriage, Sula leaves Medallion. Her alienation is more psychological than existential. But for Nel, her marriage is greater than her friendship and she possesses the new feeling that she is wanted by someone who is able to see her singly. Sula feels the loneliness after her friend’s marriage but Nel becomes more self-conscious when Sula leaves.

Sula is delighted to come back to Medallion after 10 years. Though Nel loves married life, she also loves Sula’s presence. Sula made love with Jude, Nel’s husband and succeeds in seducing him. Thus Jude leaves Nel. /she can envision the future to be devoid of happiness without Jude. Though Sula had sex with Jude, she treasures her friendship with Nel. To her sex is though “pleasant and frequent” is “unremarkable”, unlike her remarkable friendship with Nel. What is important for Sula is the friendship she had nurtured and developed with Nel in the midst of a world that promised separation.

Sula never lead a successful life, but to her she has an independent life, proceeds in her own path of freedom. In this course of freedom, she achieves nothing, yet destroyed herself but created a picture that she is a rare woman among the black woman community who have set of
morals to follow to be a black woman. Thus, Sula is a heroine who realizes the dire consequences of alienation.

One of the most critically acclaimed living writers, Morrison has been a major architect in creating a literary language for Afro-Americans. Her use of shifting perspective, fragmentary narrative, and a narrative voice extremely close to the consciousness of her characters reveals the influence of writers like Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner: two writers that Morrison, not coincidentally, studied extensively while a college student. All of her works also show the influence of African–American folklore, songs and women’s gossip. In her attempts to map these oral art forms onto literary modes of representation, Morrison has created a body of work informed by a distinctly black sensibility while drawing a reading audience form across racial boundaries.

REFERENCES


