



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X Vol 18 . No. II July - December 2022



Major Themes in Toni Morrison's Fiction: A Study

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is one of the most influential writers in American literary history. She was the genuine voice of African-American fiction as well as she was an icon of Black Literature. She was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American woman to win this honor. The Nobel committee called Morrison as “A literary artist of the first rank” Morrison novels develop a literary view of Black American experience that is both fabulistic and realistic. Story-telling is historiography in Morrison’s fiction, and in each novel, she carefully examines the role of narrative in the reconstitution of both the individual self and society at large. Morrison is an inspiration for many writers, artists and readers in the literary world. Her novels were translated into more than twenty different languages. Morrison writings have been praised universally by many eminent scholars and critics. Whether it is fiction or non-fiction Morrison focuses on a wide variety of themes like race, class and gender, individual and community, history and culture. Morrison’s stories are conscious of African cultural heritage as well as African-American history. Many great writers are influenced by this legendary African-American writer of all times, the upcoming writers may follow her dedication and commitment to be a successful

Toni Morrison is one of the most influential writers in American literary history. She is a genuine voice of African-American fiction as well as an icon of Black Literature. She was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American woman to win this honor. The Nobel committee called Toni Morrison as “A literary artist of the first rank” (2016 63). Alice Walker another great American writer praised Toni Morrison: No one writes more beautifully than Toni Morrison. She consistently explores the issues of true complexity and terror and love in the lives of African- Americans. Toni Morrison’s works continued to influence writers and artists through her focus on African- American life and her commentary on race relations. “Toni Morrison is an extraordinarily good writer. Two pages into anything she writes one feels the power of her language and the emotional authority behind that language.” (The Village Voice)

Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, exploration of the black experience, and richly detailed African-American characters. Toni Morrison novels develop a literary view of Black American experience that is both fabulistic and realistic. Sickels, Amyhig wrote in his book: *Multicultural Voices African-American Writers*,

African-American literature occupies a central and abiding place in the nation’s schools, colleges, and universities; the story of the nation’s literature is indistinguishable from the contributions African-Americans have made to it. The United States is a rich tapestry of religious, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, and American literature reflects this diversity, encouraging multiple backgrounds and

perspectives and expanding the borders of the canon to include the broadest possible range of authors and voices (2010 7).

Toni Morrison's publications include eleven novels namely *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and *The God Help the Child* (2015), eight books for children, one short story, one play, one book of literary criticism, one edited and one co-edited volume of cultural criticism, and scores of critical essays, reviews, and articles. The story of Morrison's rise to prizewinning author and public intellectual speaks of her talent, fundamental changes in American society, and her own understanding of what it has meant to be African-American in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America. Morrison was born to Chloe Anthony Wofford, on February 18, 1931, the second of four children in Lorain, Ohio. Her grandparents had moved to north from Georgia and knew the reality of racial violence. Morrison's father told her folk tales of the black community and her grandmother kept a dream book in which she documented her dreams, believing they could foretell the future. When she started writing, her rich family and cultural heritage played an inspiring role in her fiction Morrison grew up in an environment steeped in black culture, ritual music and language, in a family that encouraged her to believe in herself and be proud of her origins.

Morrison's father was convinced that the blacks were superior to the whites, a belief that deeply influenced her. Her father impressed a positive self-image upon Morrison. Morrison's mother took pleasure in singing constantly. Her grandfather played the violin, well enough to have been a professional, early in life. Folk superstitions, rituals, and lore also played an exciting part in the family's existence. Her grandmother kept a dream book, whose symbols she decoded for playing the numbers her parents were gifted story-tellers who impressed on their children the value of the family history and the vitality of their people's language. In a lighter mood, they enjoyed thrilling their children with scary ghost stories. All these Morrison absorbed, so that, when she finally started writing; her rich family heritage played an inspiring role in her fiction. These childhood experiences helped to craft Morrison's ability to incorporate music, myths, history, fact, fiction and an exceptional use of black language in developing her own stories and her own unique writing style.

For Toni Morrison, storytelling and the process of writing are ways to explore the central challenges of human existence—how individuals both flourish and hurt one another, how oppression operates, how communities sustain generations. Despite these myriad concerns, Morrison insists that her novels are unified by one central issue:

All the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. . . . About love and how to survive—not to make a living—but how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something. Each one of us is in some way at some moment a victim and in no position to do a thing about it. Some child is always left unpicked up at some moment. In a world like that, how does one remain whole—is it just impossible to do that? (Morrison 1994 40)

Toni Morrison's novels may be read as a sustained exploration of the nature of love, for it is love that motivates both her characters and her writing. In her work, love is never a simple matter of romance or familial commitment, but is instead composed of all the weaknesses and beauties of human need. Love can damage and heal, can nurture and destroy. She has created a body of work that has inspired both sharp criticism and high praise, while also fundamentally transforming the American literary landscape. Storytelling is historiography in Toni Morrison's fiction, and in each novel she carefully examines the role of narrative in the reconstitution of both the individual self and society at large. Hove observes that Toni Morrison's use of multiple narrative voices in many of her fictions is a key element of her work. Hove notes

that “Toni Morrison’s fictions repeatedly challenge cultural traditions defined by patriarchal, assimilationist, and totalising standards. Ever since her first novel--she has set herself in opposition to the European–American white mainstream by portraying and celebration unique, powerful voices of marginalised women from American history and contemporary American life” (254). Indeed her single accomplishment as a writer is that she has managed, uncannily, to invest her own mode of literary representation. Philip Page argues that Toni Morrison’s novels are

post-modern, not in the sense of extreme self-referentiality or in the mockery of narration, but in their privileging of Poly– vocalism, stretched boundaries, open-endedness, and unravelled binary oppositions. In her novels, time is nonlinear, the forms are open, multiple voices are heard and endings are ambiguous because Toni Morrison insists on the necessity of continual and multiple reworking – for characters, narrators, author, and readers. Forming an identity, authoring a text, telling a story, and reading or listening to a text must be ongoing, not fixed in time, place, or position. Since wholeness is illusory and division is endemic, one must explore the fragmentations through multiple visions (Philip Page 1995 34-5).

This fundamental need to write highlights Morrison’s deep commitment to the African-American community as well as to the radical possibilities of narrative. She has explained that it is through story that we best understand others and hence recognize our role in and responsibilities to society. Stories nurture and enliven us, providing us with ways to make sense of both our world and ourselves. Toni Morrison’s writing is both difficult and accessible:

She was known for her densely lyrical narratives and for epic storytelling. Influences include Faulkner’s modernist lyricism and Garcia Marquez’s magical realism. Toni Morrison often writes about magical events and mythical characters, while grounding narratives in an often brutal reality. Her novels feature shifting points of view often past and present memory, community, gender and identity are major themes explored in her novels. Toni Morrison examines the history of racism and slavery in the United States, depicting the injustice and inhumanity that prevailed, while at the same time revealing the power of love, faith and redemption. Toni Morrison is one of the nation’s most widely read and highly regarded living authors; her novels explore the rich tapestry of the African-American experience, the lives of women, and the flaws and beauty of the human condition (Sickels 2010 32).

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In June of 2019, director Timothy Greenfield-Sanders released a documentary of her life called *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*. Toni Morrison the extraordinary American writer passed away on 5 August 2019, two months later from complications of pneumonia. Toni Morrison and her works are inspiring the audience and as well as a great number of new generation writers also. Toni Morrison's works are genuine representation of African-Americans and their lives.

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