Research Paper Literature

Feminism and Ethnicity in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT

Feminism and Ethnicity have political and cultural connotations. Different waves of feminism over the centuries have endeavoured to liberate women and to carve a place for women in society. Several novelists, especially the novelists of New Literatures portray the realisitic picture of women. Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize winner of first black woman not only reached the peak of literary veneration, but also wrote thematically arresting and emotionally moving novels. The Bluest Eye (1970) the first novel remains one of the best. Being a multi-faceted woman, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prise for her novel, Beloved. The author of this article traverses through her novels. The Bluest Eye (1970, Sula (1974), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987) Love (2003) and A Mercy (2008) to explore how Toni Morrison depicted feminism and ethnicity. The novelist plays the role of ethnic cultural feminist and tries to alleviate prejudices and misconceptions and seeks ways to reinforce the value that racism and sexism would take away from the beauty, the work and the cultural values of black women.

KEYWORDS

FEMINISM AND ETHNICITY TO END SEXIST AND SOCIAL OPPRESSION

Feminism can be defined both politically and culturally. It is defined politically by Bell Hooks in ***Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre*** as a movement to end sexist oppression. Elain Showalter gives the cultural perspective of feminism as self-conscious interest in and celebration of the values, belief, ideas and behaviour uniquely or traditionally characteristic of women in "Toward a Feminist Poetics". Similarly ethnicity also has political and cultural definitions. Its political definition is derived from the desire on the part of minority ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society to end social oppression by the dominant ethnic group. Culturally it is defined as a self-conscious interest in and celebration of the separate values, belief, ideas and behaviour of all ethnic groups in society.

Correcting the Wrongs Inflicted on Women and Minority Ethnic Groups

A writer has a desire to correct the wrongs that have been historically levelled against women and minority ethnic groups. Feminist scholarship unravels the reasons and the ways in which power can and should be shared with women. At times it celebrates the values, the beliefs – the culture – uniquely characteristic of women.

Black Women Dislike Both Sexist and Racist Oppression

Black has historically suffered oppression because of both race and gender. They abhor both sexist and racism oppression, since they belong to minority ethnic status, they keep their allegiance to ancestral group. They shun an advocacy of the kind of political, existential feminism embraced by many women of the majority culture. Black women are more concerned with feminism that is usually more group-centered than self-centered, more cultural than political. Hence they are concerned more 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. Thus they are able to address the rights and values of women without separating themselves from an allegiance to their ethnic group.

Morrison as Ethnic Cultural Feminist

Morrison combines in her women characters their concern for feminism and ethnicity. Morrison exposes the damages that sexist oppression caused on black women, both inside and outside of the ethnic group. She does not prescribe an existential, political feminism as a solution to the oppression of black women. Rather she celebrates the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of their ethnic group. Being an ethnic cultural feminist she sees feminism as one that encourages allegiance to rather than an alienation from ethnic group.

Questioning the Anglo-Saxon Standard of Female Beauty

In her first novel, ***The Bluest Eye*** Morrison reiterates that the perpetuation by the larger society of a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self worth is one of the most damaging components of sexist and racist oppression on black women. The pre-requisites for female beauty and virtue are blonde hair and blue eyes, according to this standard. Morrison believes that a physical standard of beauty commercializes the virtue of all women. This physical standard suggests that women who are not Anglo-Saxon are not beautiful and hence inferior. Morrison questions this myth in most of her novels.

"The concept of physical beauty as a virtue", says Morrison, "is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western World, and we should have nothing to do with it, physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present, future"

Feminism in The Bluest Eye

Pauline and Pecola Breedlove in the novel feel that their self-esteem is summarily destroyed by their and the black community's acceptance of the standards of feminine beauty. They unflinchingly believe that the closer a woman is to Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty the more desirable they becomes Instead of white skin, they prefer yellow or light brown skin. In the place of blonde hair they like long straight hair of any colour. If not the blue eyes, it is sharply chiseled features that look more Caucasin than African, that they prefer. Since they didn't have any one of these, they were completely hopeless and they became the subject of constant ridicule and rejection. Pauline was not "pretty" by these standards, so she gave up an caring for herself and her family. Pecola bemoaned the rejection her "ugliness" caused her and prayed for blue eyes as a solution.

Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made here ignored or despised at school teachers and classmates alike. She was the

only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk.. Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that one of the girls at school wanted to particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him. She would say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breed love! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! And never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused.

Pauline and Pecola Victims of the Sexist and Racist Oppression

Morrison portrays Pauline and Pecola as victims of the sexist and racist oppression of an Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty. None of them voices a self-conscious protest against this condition. It is because Morrison's focus of criticism is not on the way in which black women should rebel against prevailing social standards on beauty, but on the society which makes such women victims.

Need for Self-Conscious Appreciation of the Particular Beauty of Black Women

Pauline and Pecola are the victims of both the sexist and racist oppression of an Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty. The enemy of their oppression is not just men-black or white. Their real enemy is the entire majority culture that has perpetuated the standard in every channel available to them. Morrison doesn't suggest political feminism as solution. For it alienates black women from black men. Rather she suggests a more self-conscious appreciation of the particular beauty of black women by everyone in the society.

Sula and Tar Baby Exploring the Implications of a Black Woman's Self-Conscious Objection

Sula and Jadine are the protagonists of her novels ***Sula*** and ***Tar Baby***. Through their roles Morrison explores the implications of a black woman's self-conscious objection to these oppressions. According to these characters physical standards of beauty don't oppress them and as a result they reject them. They believe that the subservient roles that black women have generally taken up in society oppress them.

Morrison points out that too much of their time has historically been given over to the domestic work of making life comfortable for others. This results in offering few chances for them to think about or realize their own self-fulfillment. These characters especially resent the black woman's acceptance of this role for herself. Therefore they take the risk of distancing themselves from other black women and also seek to assert a sense of self-defined outside of the parameters set for women by the black community as well as by the society at large. "Your way is one but it's not my way," Jadine admits to her aunt, "I don't want to be like you. I don't want to be that kind of woman".

Jadine and Sula are Morrison's Objectors :

These two characters speak out against their oppression and criticize black women who serve these roles. Morrison gives them full opportunity to voice their objections to what they view as the limited life of black women. However she doesn't condone the existentialist position. Morrison seems to suggest that a definition of self that excludes an ethnic cultural connection will for minority ethnic women finally be empty and meaningless. "Sula knows all that is there to know about herself because she examiners herself, she is experimentally with herself. She's perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing and so on. But she has a trouble making a connection with other people and just feeling that lovely sense of accomplishment of being close in a very strong way". These black women are made to come to terms with their ethnic connection in the black community. They are either forced to return to the community or they are haunted by a feeling of betrayal of its feminine cultural values.

'Liberation does not mean 'Alienation' from One's Ethnic community

Like Sula, Jadine too tries to defy the conventions of womanhood set forth by black community. She rebels against the ways of her aunt and the black women of her past. Jadine sees these women as backward; like Sula, she sees no self-fulfilling value in the role that they serve. Because she is of a later generation than Sula. Jadine has greater opportunities to follow the non-traditional lifestyle that Sula desired with more success. She holds a graduate degree; she is a successful model, she lives an upper class European lifestyle, and she has none of the encumbrances of husband, home and family. She is the contemporary 'liberated' woman. But for Black Women Morrison suggests that liberation must not bring with it alienation from the ethnic community.

Conclusion

Morrison's heroic women keep their energies and vision focused on that which is worthwhile and sustaining. Mrs.Mc Teer, Eva, Pilate, Ondine and the old Women of *The Bluest Eye* are the heroines of Morrison's fiction. They did not have societal support system that paid them well or appreciated their beauty and the often dual role as homemaker and provider they assumed in their families. But these women kept their vision and their energies focused on that which was worthwhile and sustaining. The ability of these women, Morrison believes, is too often ridiculed in negative matriarchal jargon that diminishes the context in which they perform them. Thus her role, as ethnic cultural feminist, has been to try to alleviate these prejudices and misconceptions and to seek ways to reinforce the value that racism and sexism would take away from

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