

Freedom and Self in the Works of Wole Soyinka and Morrison

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Introduction

Although Morrison's works celebrate the black female identity, they do not carry any bias against the male society. She aims towards a level of communication in the male-female relationship that is based on mutual and individual self-worth. Morrison reasons out that each gender has its traits and an eminent role to play; inferiority of one suggests its inequality, oppression and subordination to the other. The relationship between the two ought to be at par with each other. Morrison does not reflect the feminist mode as a discipline that sees the world through the woman's eyes only but also involves the functioning of the cosmology as a whole and the diversity of the socio-political arenas.

The gaze on the body of the woman and her reproductive freedom along with sexual orientation comes within the context of Morrison's deliberation on gender and racial studies. Her works reflect an aura of tension and frustration of the black man and woman who have suffered decades of subordination and slavery to the white man. The quest for the black female identity is not merely the voice of the black woman; it is a passionate call of the black woman to make her place in the society in which prevails the racial and gender politics of United States.

Review of Literature

The strong political leanings of Soyinka depict the writer's deep concern for his nation. His political involvement is related to his insistence on his integrity as a human being. He once remarked: "I have one abiding religion - human liberty" (Tate 34). His fervent desire for an egalitarian and democratic society conveys his modern and emancipated outlook. His strong distaste for the native hegemonistic oligarchic set up shows his progressive vision. Both Soyinka and Morrison write for the welfare of common humanity and their work has attracted lot of critical attention from round the world. The works of Soyinka aim at highlighting the "Promethean reality" of human existence. The modern progressive vision of the writer is implicit in his belief in an egalitarian society which should have "egalitarianism in justice, in economic welfare in the right of each individual to achieve maximum fulfillment" (Jeyifo 41).

Mark De Shazer in her dissertation published in 2000 calls for "a comparative study of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker' novels as both of them portray the difficulties of Afro-American women" (160). Bell Hooks in his book published in 2003 calls Morrison "as the writer of women rights" (56). Still, there are numerous published and unpublished theses on Morrison across research circles all around the world.

Recent research on Toni Morrison is based on the images of women in her novels. Critics have written commentaries on the problems of black women, represented by Toni Morrison in her novels. Claudia Tate throws light on the difficulties faced by black women in her doctoral thesis when she describes her world as, "Web of tensions and anxieties" (120). Stepto Roberts in her dissertation published in 2005 observes Morrison as "deeply concerned about the welfare of women, more particularly African women" (67).

The black feminist analysis of the *Beloved* and *Sula* theorizes power relations between the whites and the blacks and the shaping of black subjectivity and identity during slavery and the

neo slavery period. “The power relations are studied in the broad context of the man-made phenomenon of racism, sustained by the acquired behaviour of a dominant group of people towards another physically dissimilar group” (Baker 84). It is based on the myth that white skin colour represents racial superiority and whiteness is synonymous with beauty and virtue. The fiction, forming part of the racist ideology, brings forth the system by which the white meta-ethnicity exercises hegemonic control over the lives of the blacks in America.

The Problem

Africa was colonized in a very systematic way by the European powers. They prescribed and super-imposed an infrastructure for African social life, so that the entire continent became an adjunct of the European political and economic life. White colonial hegemonistic appropriations made the situation repulsive and abhorrent for the traditional African psyche. The collision of values created anarchy in society as humans got encapsulated in the quagmire of diverse cultures. Added to this dilemma was the political upheaval and unrest, something adding to the already volatile nature of society. Frantz Fanon aptly says:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it (Fanon 169).

The African writer himself has almost always been a microcosm of the accumulated experiences of his society. He has been the historian of his continent’s increasingly widened outlook on life, moving from a limited, virtually closed-off societal view of the village and the clan to an ever-widening world view.

Centuries of agony of white oppression produced volumes of literature vindicating black pride, expressing protest in a most sophisticated and often angry, incisive and moving idiom. The African writer wanted to demonstrate the wickedness of a social system in which the black man was trapped. The pre-Independence era saw the literature cantering around traditional African village life and the initial conflicts with Western religion and colonialism followed by a more direct confrontation with Western education and urbanization. As the continent sped past independence, it was confronted with increasing political problems and economic stability. Drama was the potent means of instilling social awareness, creating national consciousness and projecting the African reactions to inhumanities and injustices dating back from the effronteries unleashed by the inimical forces of Slave Trade, Colonialism, and Neo-colonialism.

Morrison felt the need to highlight the difficulties faced by black women in American society. Even black men do not give them respect all the time. The wielders of sexual/social/political power promote the belief that girls and women are inferior to boys and men. It is strengthened by early sexual and familial development. Feminists attach great significance to psychoanalysis because of this pervasive prejudice. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has revised Freudian theory with the help of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of discourse. Though not a protagonist of feminism, he has influenced the feminists. His work is relevant to them because they are concerned with the human subject.

Morrison functions in a highly racial society where she highlights the realities, incidents, experiences and taboos that come along with being black, and a woman at the same time in different periods of history: from the torturous time of slavery to becoming a modern black American woman. Morrison's black women are a product of history, of contemporary socio-economic situations, of gender bias and of the culture that they are brought up in. She provides a

local fictional backdrop for a conceptual understanding of the social, gender and cultural power play, and how the individual situates herself within these realms. Morrison believes that cultural transmission and cultural transaction is possible within and beyond the author's own environment.

Scope

Wole Soyinka heralds the dawn of a new age in the African cultural renaissance. His unique voice brings the most dynamic of African performative traditions and mythology together with the socially rooted traditions of Western drama. His work has already taken its deserved place in contemporary theatrical discourse. For Soyinka, writing is inextricably linked with the effort to create a just and a democratic society in post-colonial Africa. He became the conscience of his country during its many totalitarian regimes.

Soyinka is considered the most vocal and vociferous representative of a highly chaotic, transitional state in Nigerian history, which was experiencing the avalanche of Western ideas sweeping over the tradition, bound society. What distinguishes him from other writers is his courageous voice for justice, freedom and the end of tyranny. He has risked his life time and again to articulate the moral principles that provide the foundation for human rights, both in his native Nigeria and around the world.

Most of the critical studies on Soyinka focus either on the mythical aspect of his drama or socio-political milieu that affects the psyche of his characters. My objective is to trace how the signature gestures of his protest start as merely veiled socio-political commentaries and eventually develop into scathing attacks on the abuse of power.

Morrison's novels represent a period in history of African-American community, during which social and cultural forms had undergone transformation. The white race believed that that

they were entitled to command the ‘others’, and replenish the earth since it was the only one that sought out the new and distant lands and even a New World. It was said that the “Niger’s are brought out of a pagan country, into places where the Gospel is Preached.” (Sewal 652) The blacks have suffered from racial discrimination and social injustices ever since they set foot in the American continent.

Morrison enlightens her readers and inculcates in her characters the significance of the black self-definition and the pride they must have in their dark skin and the Afro-American heritage. Through her character types she reflects the development of self in connection with the racial dilemmas and gender bias that they must face in the course of the story. Sexuality, procreative powers, maternity and economic struggle are the testifying features for the women characters of Morrison’s novels. She also provides these characters with strong insights, powerful articulation and objective ways to control the complex situations that may arise. The narrowed social construction of black womanhood, the tensions of family life, and the socio-economic struggle of the individual in society, sexuality and sexual integrity are the general motifs of Morrison’s novels. She discourages stereotypical representation of black woman in the literary world. She has also confronted some of the myths of the black woman’s character types that have been portrayed in the past. She analyses the black woman in literature as an eminent part of black behaviour in its totality. The author has thrown light on the basic salient features of the black women in America that are debatable: the economic, political and social status, psychological reactions to the racial practices against them, the pragmatic life as the ‘lesser’ gender, and the influence and practice of the African culture they carry with them along with American traits that they tend to adapt, Morrison has provided the reader with an essential insight into the life experience of a black woman in America.

Toni Morrison and Wole Soyinka's works are of great significance in the global world of today. They have addressed vital subjects of race, gender, culture, economic status, and the political effects on the social and humane ethos. The focus of this research is on issues pertaining to racial exploitation, colonial oppression and urge for decolonisation of the human mind in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1977), *Beloved* (1987) and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi's Harvest*. Over the last three decades Morrison and Soyinka works have come steadily to assume an increasing critical standing and cultural prominence and has developed in number of new directions.

Beloved and *Sula* focus on a minority ethnic group, existing on the fringes of the elitist white culture. The female protagonists' quest for identity and authentic existence has ideological engagement with colonialism, as reflected in the homogenizing power of the mainstream culture, its impingement on the psyche of the blacks and the concomitant issues of culture, community, ethnicity and identity. Thus, these texts present an argument in favour of post modernism in so far as they address cultural heterogeneity and differences, indicated by the three black female protagonists and contextualize patriarchy and authoritarianism of the dominant class that oppresses them 'the other.'

The human intellect by its very nature is a force for change and a medium for change. A conflict between the tradition and will is the beginning of Soyinka's protest. In the plays written during the pre-independence decade, Soyinka adopts the masks of satire and parody directed against society itself and its power structures. His criticism is bound up with his metaphysics, and, in his terms, goes well beyond an attack on any particular system. It reaches towards an understanding of the fundamental basis of man's existence. Soyinka's work is, at this stage, basically a critique of society which develops out of metaphysical considerations.

Conclusion

Morrison's novels represent a period of history of African-American community, during which social and cultural forms had undergone transformation. The white race believed that they were entitled to command the 'others', and replenish the earth since it was the only one that sought out the new and distant lands and even a New World. It was said that the "Niger's are brought out of a pagan country, into places where the Gospel is Preached." (Sewal 652) The blacks have suffered from racial discrimination and social injustices ever since they set foot in the American continent.

Wole Soyinka's role is vital as he take up issues of inequality and injustice during the British regime and its after-effects on the lives of his countrymen. He knows that it is very difficult to grow in an environment marred by injustice, hatred, violence and inequality. Therefore, all his works mark a protest against policies governed by selfish motives.

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi 's Harvest* highlight the change in Soyinka's voice of protest. He used his drama as a tool in the satirical revue form to make known his feelings. 1960 saw the Independence of Nigeria: it was a time of violence, victimization, repression, censorship, when the press and radio were both increasingly under pressure from the government. Soyinka's satire, which definitely shows beginnings of dissent, is aimed at the transition from colonialism and how the new rulers behave exactly like their forebears.

Sula is a study of an individual against the group consciousness in the black society. Sula is the 'new world woman' of Morrison's vision. She creates the air of a woman who is not under social constrictions, and who believes in her own will, for this reason she is condemned in a traditional society. She is beyond the fixed notions of society. Although society constructs Sula's image, she is naturally not born to be a part of such a traditional society; this type of woman

seems to be a visionary product, which Morrison has created to build the contrast an adventurer against the rigidity of the society that she lives. This character type has been brought forth using the backdrop of “a moral and political framework concerned with redressing social wrongs”, (Thompson 7) which has been fashioned to highlight Sula’s ‘wrong’ and ‘right’ doings. It seems as though Morrison has tried to give her individuality a new light in the feminine world, she suggests that to be an individual feminism does not suggest set norms. Likewise Denis Thompson says that, “human beings ought to be free to choose between alternatives...The individual is a free agent...and allows herself to recognize that alternatives exist” (Thompson 50).

It is the portrait of the traditional woman who lives within the norms of society and on the other hand, the image of a nonconforming black woman functioning against all norms of society. Despite any real or perceived limitations imposed by her family, her community, or the era in which she is depicted, Sula does not put any confines upon herself. Here, Morrison exposes the attitude of the individual towards society and society towards the individual. She draws attention towards the basic social status of the woman in a conservative coloured society in America, at the time between the two world wars.

Soyinka’s drama transforms from a mild satire to a movement against colonial and post-Colonial forces in Nigeria. For twenty seven months, until October 1969, Soyinka was detained in solitary confinement, and in *The Madmen and Specialists*, he purged his rancour and despair accumulated during those months in detention. The setting of the play is the tense, post civil war period (Biafran War) that saw a brutalized society. As the crisis deepened, the theatre of Soyinka demanded a positive social thinking and purposeful communal action. Herein, his protest as resistance took a socialist, revolutionary form, attacking various social anomalies, tyranny and

national scandals. Only a countering force of resistance can liberate the enslaved portion of mankind. *Death and the King's Horseman* is another play that will trace this change.

Like the black literary tradition Morrison seek to interrogate and dismantle the very structures and histories of racial domination. *Beloved* is a demanding novel, insisting that its reader attend to and acknowledge the historical weight of the stories that it tells so hauntingly, as *beloved* herself makes growing claims upon Sethe for love, remembrance and recognition; perhaps even seeking retribution for the damage done. Similarly, the black race too wants recognition and justice for the damage done to them.

The historical past in *Beloved*, which has been a turning point in literary history; represents black history not in the coherent or in the literal sense, but through memory and reverie. It is almost episodic in interpretation. Toni Morrison has made the reader re-live the past through this creation. *Beloved* has also been read as a de-historicized psychoanalysis. The novel is beautiful aesthetic representation of the past to meet the social and political expectations of the present, fusing a brilliant formal and linguistic complexity with a wider vision in which questions of slavery, race, gender and dilemmas of historical memory are posed together.

Even though Soyinka's works show all the stylistic excellence of literary masterpieces, they never escape his 'protest'. It will also point out the unique place that Soyinka holds amongst the contemporary playwrights and locate Soyinka in the context of the age in which he continues to write, and assess his contribution to the dramatic genre. As James Gibbs has very aptly said about Soyinka, "He disturbs, he disquietens, he delights, he demands attentions and now...Africa herself, cannot do without him" (*Critical Perspectives*15).

As a writer, Morrison has attempted to create a vision for her future woman as seen *Sula*. This woman is liberated and self-reliant. She is above all social norms and conformist

subjugation. Here the woman seems also to be celebrating the concept of the ‘body’. Her body becomes her own. Morrison has been able to impart speech and expression to the black woman’s body. Her native strength has been given a platform to stand on. Her “womanly being” has been treated as an individual.

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