



Theme of superstition and religion in the novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Ms Toni Morrison was originally born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931 in the small town of Lorain, Ohio. She was the first American woman in the fifty years to win the National Booker Prize in 1978 and Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1993. She was the first African-American ever honoured by the Nobel Award Committee of Sweden. She belongs to the black generation and was brought up amidst the white world of America, facing all kinds of sufferings at the hands of the white people. Generation after generation, the black people struggled hard for the crumbs of bread. They were cursed, condemned, exploited and tortured for no fault of their own. Morrison, through her novels, has very beautifully depicted the miserable life of the black people in America. The wounded Negroes psyche also find an apt expression in her novels. Consequently the sufferings of Blacks are the main content of her Novels. Superstition and religion are closely associated and inseparable concept. They play important role in the life of the blacks. Alongwith the themes of exploitation, discrimination, poverty and privation of the black people, she has highlighted the superstition and religion of the black people. Her novels, the Bluest Eye, Sula, The Beloved, The Tar Baby and The Song of Solomon present a clear and vivid picture of the superstition and religion the black people believe in. The theme of superstition and religion seem to dominate the Novels of Toni Morrison.

Keywords: superstition, religion, miracles, supernatural, conjuration, biblical, faith black, white

Introduction

Toni Morrison gives a faithful picture of the life of black men and women in America with reference to a particular time and space. The presentation is faithful and sincere and all that is good and bad, foolish and wise, comes before the eyes of the reader in a powerful way. Thus fads and fashions, myths and legends, superstition and religion in whatever form they are with the black people, are broadly highlighted. She does not want to create any sensation regarding the black life but she must do justice to the lives of those who had suffered much injustice. She puts before us pictures which were real to the black people and explained her views in certain interviews also.

“My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way world was for me and for the black people that I knew.

In addition to the very shrewd, down to the earth, efficient way in which they did things and survived things, there was this other knowledge and perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. Informal kind of Cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting and so it seemed impossible for me to write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was unbelievable”.

She has observed the black lore, music and language, myths and rituals that give her prose its special flavour and force. She recalls, “We were Intimate with the supernatural.” Her parents told thrillingly terrifying ghost stories. Her mother sang constantly. Her grandmother kept a dream book and played the numbers off it, decoding dream symbols to determine what number to bet on. Morrison's world like the world of her novels, was filled with signs, visitations, and ways of knowing that reaches beyond the five senses. She confesses in an interview with Betty J. Parker,

“I am very superstitious. And that is a word that is in disrepute, but whatever it is I am has something to do with my relationship to things other than human beings”.

Morrison's novels deal with magic, miracles, enchantment and superstitions that black people believe in. She makes use of Voodoo in her novels denoting belief and practice to magic expressed in, for example, conjuring, sorcery, divination, relationship among spiritual forces and the effective use of herbs to cure, kill and control behavior and persons etc. In almost every novel there is a person practicing magic. In *The Bluest Eye*, people consider Soaphead Church as supernatural rather than unnatural.

“His business was dread; people came to him to dread, whispered in dread, wept and pleaded in dread. And dread was what he counseled”

He was a reader, adviser, and interpreter of dreams, who caused miracles like granting Pecola her desired blue eyes.

In *Sula*, says Morrison, “the people are like people I have always known who may or may not be superstitious, but they look at the world differently, cosmology is little bit different.” Sula's grandmother is interpreter of dreams. Hannah's horrible death by fire is foretold by a number of signs and omens as a wind that brought no rain and Hannah's dream of the wedding in the red-dress. After Hannah's death Eva interprets the sign of Hannah's dream, “weddings always meant death. And the red gown, well that was fire”.

Ajax's mother is a conjure woman, who, “blessed with seven adoring children whose joy it was to bring here the plants, hair, underclothing, finger nail parings, white hens, blood, camphor, pictures kerosene and foot-step – dust that she needed, as well as to order to Van Van, High John the conqueror, Little John to Chew, Devil's Shoe String,

Chinese Wash, Mustard Seed and the Nine Herbs from Cincinnati. She knew about weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and illness and made a modest living with her skills.”

These descriptions not only prove black people’s faith in superstitions but also suggest the death of Morrison’s hoary knowledge. It further proves that her use of fantasy is mimetic. Sula becomes a personification of evil, a devil in the community. When Sula returns after a long gap accompanied by the plague of robins, the community people accused her of it. Morrison mentions the superstitious conception of the people in the following words:

“So they laid broom sticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps. But aside from one or two unsuccessful efforts to collect the dust from her foot steps they did nothing to harm her. As always the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run”.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison further blurs the lines between mimesis and fantasy. There are many events which are apparently supernatural. These events are so numerous in the novel that reality and fantasy become indistinguishable and the reader has to accept the fantastic as an established corollary to the real world wherein Pilate can be born without a navel and can talk to her dead father. Ruth’s watermark does not grow each day and Shalimar and Milkman can fly. The character of Pilate is one of the best examples of mingling of the real and the bizarre, natural and the supernatural. She was born after the death of her mother, “She died and the next minute I was born. But she was dead by the time I drew air”. She was born without the navel. She continues a close and supportive posthumous communication with her father’s spirit, an important compensation for isolation from other human beings. She tells Ruth,

“I saw him wiggling on the ground, but not only I-see him die, I seen him since he was shot. Macon seen his too. After he buried him, after he was blown off that fence. We both seen him. I see him still. He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know”.

Again, it was the absence of her navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels. They believe she has “the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into ripe rutabaga”. Her magical practices reaffirm their belief. It is her magical power that makes Ruth pregnant with Milkmen. Ruth tells, “She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray-grassy-looking stuff to put in his food. It worked too. Macon came to me for four days”. Moreover, Pilate also helps Ruth during pregnancy to protect her son. She put a small doll on Macon’s chair in his office. “A male doll with a small painted chicken-bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly”. Morrison introduces flying men because, “It was about black people who could fly; fly was one of the-our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere – people used to talk about it. It is in the spirituals and gospels”.

The black people believe in ghosts and witches. Freddie says to Milkman, “You better mean they are in the world.” And his mother was killed by ghosts, “But trey’s a lot of strange things you don’t know nothing about, boy”.

In *Tar Baby*, too, there is a ghost of Valerian’s first wife while *Beloved*, is all about a ghost. At the very outset truth about ghosts and ancestors is being affirmed in the novel’s epigraph, a citation from Romans:

I will call them my people, which were not my people;
And her beloved, which was not beloved.

Elements of mysticism – conjuration, superstition and spiritual visitation are also there in her novels. They are suggested in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* and well-developed in *Song of Solomon*. In *Tar Baby*, boundaries between myth and reality seem to disappear. This novel is set in supernatural environment. The *Isle de Chevaliers* is a thinking community of plants, animals and weather. The novelist has mentioned the superstitious environment in her words:

“When labourers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue sky of the sky were no longer permanent. Wild parrots that had escaped the stones of hungry children in Queen of France agreed and raised havoc as they flew away to look for yet another refuge. Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamond bacs that slept in their arms. It took the reader to persuade them that indeed the world was altered”.

Beloved is Morrison’s most unambiguous endorsement of the supernatural. The novel is so rife with physical and spiritual presence of a ghost that the better term would be ancestors. As Bradley says, “Ghost is not the right word. Ghost is a word that was invented by the people who did not believe. Ancestors is a better term”. *Beloved* is not merely a fascination of what is difficult than drive the sap out of veins. On the contrary, the difficulties of it (*Beloved*) set our sap flowing. Morrison clarifies the reason to use ghost, “I was pleased with strategy of the ghost because it helps the readers understand that factually incredible things which was slavery.” Introduction of supernatural termed as uncanny is defined by Shelling as, “The name for everything ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light when *Beloved*’s venomous and spiteful spirit comes to torment Sethe; it disappears and returns as twenty one year old girl. She disappears finally by the efforts of community women”.

Readers cannot approach Morrison’s fictive world armed with the reality of every-day life. By casually mingling the real and bizarre, Morrison, “has achieved a subtler and more satisfying synthesis between those crude abstractions, reality and imagination, and those equally crude adjustable spanners of criticism, objective and subjective.”

Morrison seems to question the superficial boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds, between myth and reality. These differences disappear in *Beloved*, *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon*, and are violated to probe their reality, and more importantly “to explore the possibility of the existence of various levels of consciousness”. It confirms the fact that magic and mysticisms are not only seminal in Morrison’s work but they are often centre-pieces and very core of it. She uses them to accentuate their

intricacies as well as their manifold presence in African culture. Morrison treats the supernatural with a magnificent practicality in her books. She blends the acceptance of supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world. What is unique about Morrison's use is that she does not let either take precedence over the other. Throughout the interaction between physical and spiritual worlds, an element of the African continues and she emphasizes the need of reconciliation between these two. She suggests that a reconciliation of the spiritual and physical worlds is necessary if a complete personality, is to emerge.

Religion

Religion is a necessary part of human life so it is there with the black people in America. Men have been having faith in some supernatural being or power and it has been going on through the ages. Since Christianity was the religion of the white people, it naturally became an imposition on the black slaves. Muslims were also there in plenty and many black Americans took up the Muslim faith. Toni Morrison observed this drama of human life and presented it in the same way as she observed it. She herself had no religion of her own though the family was supposed to be Christian. The Bible was there in the family but it was not a part of Morrison's life. The black people had a kind of Pagan worship. They were surrounded by the objects of nature and took them to be objects of worship.

Since they believed in supreme-being, they took up the Christian or the Muslim faith but still followed their Pagan practices. They believed in the existence of spirit, so ancestor worship became their primary concern. Because the Negroes had come from Africa. So they were ruthlessly controlled by the white people and were not allowed to follow their native faith. They were considered savages, uncivilised and brutish. They became Christians but their culture and heritage with all its rituals remained with them. The black faith and the white religion were intermixed in the black consciousness. Blassingame remarks in this reference:

"The similarities between many European and African cultural elements enabled the slave to continue to engage in many traditional activities or to create a synthesis of European and African culture ... Christian forms were so similar to African religious patterns that it was relatively easy for the early slaves to incorporate them with their traditional practices and beliefs."

The Blacks developed a faith which had fixed elements of western religion as well as the native practices of the Africans. There came up a strong relationship between the African tradition and the Christian faith. Morrison's sums up in the following words:

"In the matters of belief there are clear areas of common ground like god, continuation of life after death, spiritual beings, the works of god, etc. on these, both Christianity and traditional religions overlap to a large extent. On the other-hand, magic, witchcraft, sorcery and divination, which feature prominently in traditional religions, fall clearly outside the Christian orbit."

Black people preserved their African-cult and even "slavocracy" failed to erase the substance of traditional

African faith completely. Slavery made the role of sorcery and witchcraft even more important and stronger in the life of slaves, as they acted as hidden spring wells of power to escape the misery of racial abuse. The province of religion remained largely unaffected by the plantation system. Black religion is quite properly understood to be profoundly Christian, but it is also deeply influenced by its African roots. While becoming Americans, Africans preserved the past - their spirituality and specific religion-cultural traditions interwoven with Christianity. Black theologian James Cone has observed

"Because white theologians and preachers denied any relationship between the scriptures and our struggle for freedom, we bypassed the classic western theological-tradition and went directly to the scripture for its word regarding our black struggle".

Religion in Morrison's novels is a multifaced phenomenon. Though her characters are apparently Christians yet their faith is a wavering one. Morrison gives her characters biblical names seeming to say that the Bible is a wrong book for blacks. The friend Elihue whitcomb in the *Bluest Eye*, has incorporated the name Micah into his own. Micah, in the Old Testament: "In that day, saith the Lord, will I assemble her that halteth and I will gather her that is driven away, and her that I have afflicted". But in that novel Elihue Micah Soaphead Church whitcomb is an evil adviser, "an embodiment of godlessness."

Morrison continues this pattern in her latter works, In *Sula*, Eva peace, leads a chaotic and painful life. Her daughter Hannah, unlike the reserved Hannah of the old Testament who dedicates her son Samuel to the service of god, is a flirt in an "old print wrap around, bare-foot in the summer, in the winter her feet in a men's leather slippers with the backs flattened under her heels," who found sex everywhere – "down into the cellars," "into the pantry and stand up against the shelves," on the flour sack. Shad rack, too, is not like his biblical counterpart who was rescued from the blazing pit; shad rack has lost his sanity in the world-war I crossfire.

In *Song of Solomon*, almost every character has a Biblical name which is inappropriate for his her situation. The narrator explains that it is the custom in the Dead family for the father to put a finger down at random on a word in the Bible and name the child accordingly. The fascination of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* lies in its subversion of all expectations. A Biblical allegory is expected in this novel, whose characters are Pilate, Hagar, Jacob, Reba, Magdalene, Ruth, First Corinthians, and Solomon. The author joyously subverts that expectation, gaily frustrating all search for hero Noma in Biblical concordances. In doing this, she is making a comment on the black use of the white book. By stressing the self -preferentiality of her names, she protects the integrity of her fiction.

Macon I selects a name for her daughter from the Bible, "Not like no river boat pilot. Like a Christian- killing Pilate", for he asked Jesus to save his wife and he didn't. The others have names that mock them. Paul praises First Corinthians for her chastity saying that the unwed are free to serve the Lord. Morrison's First Corinthians despises her celibacy. Her younger sister Magdalene called Lena, recalls her by her name of the prostitute who followed Jesus. The biblical Rebecca is the sought after bride for Isaac. She

comes to the marriage with honour and riches. Pilate's daughter Reba (short for Rebeoca), lives husbandless, from "orgasm to orgasm," and survives in meager fashion. The biblical haggar is cast into the desert with her son ismael, but when thirst overtakes them an angel show them to a well and guides them out of the wilderness. Reba's daughter, Hagar, is cast off by her lover Milkman. She is heartbroken and ultimately dies in a fever. Ruth also serves the same purpose to show the inappropriateness of the names, Edelberg says in this regards, "Morrison wishes to imply that Bible is the wrong book for blacks."

Morrison clarifies her motive behind her selection of Biblical names in an interview with Charles Ruas,

"I used the Biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, the awe of and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes."

Similarly, we have black people lodging their faith in God. For Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* "God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him". His wife Pauline considers herself as an upright Christian woman, "burdened with a no-count man, who God wanted her to punish. Mrs. Breedlove was not interested in Christ the Redeemer, but rather Christ the Judge". Pecola and Soaphead Church seem to have little faith in God's Justice for He did not listen to their demand for blue eyes. Soaphead asks the God:

"Did you forget about the children? Yes, you forgot, you let them go wanting, sit on road shoulders, crying next to their dead mothers. You forgot how and when to be God".

Then he himself grants Pecola her desired blue eyes, saying to God, "I did what you did not, could not, would not do. I played you". Though Morrison's characters abide by the Bible and attend church services, yet they are unable to find redemption in the churches of the hold redeemer. For them Christianity does not lead to the path of spiritual and psychological self, as it is practiced in modern world. Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye*, Shadrack in *Sula*, Paul D in *Beloved* and Son in *Tar Baby* reject such conventional avenues making them dependent on external world and impending their self-realization, and their achievement on a more authentic existence. Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberg observe,

"Though the church is a traditional ordinary principle for blacks, Morrison seems clearly to have little faith in the ability of the traditional institutions of human betterment to generate support and liberation for blacks."

Moreover, the Africans find themselves much closer to the Jews than to the Christians in their struggle for freedom. The Biblical Mythology was often used to justify the enslavement and oppression of the blacks. Morrison tends to shatter conventional meanings and interpretations as she draws on more conventional myths and folk material. Her characters select all the things out of Christianity they find applicable to their situation, but within this they also keep

practicing the traditional African cult. We note that the African traditional religion deeply influenced black people. Morrison's characters display their profound faith in folk religion and keep on practicing it along with Christianity. Worship of ancestors is one of such practices. Pilate keeps the bones of her dead Father in her house in a green sack hanging from the ceiling.

Morrison's characters go beyond the boundaries of conventional religion which exalts the body over spirit. She is and uncalled, unrobed, and unanointed preacher making rejuvenation rituals in which her words were sacramental. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory-bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

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