

## THEMATIC CONCERNS IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

*Ms. Anju*

Research Scholar  
Department of English,  
NIMS University, Jaipur, India

*Dr. J.K. Sharma*

Associate Professor  
Department of English, S.J.K. College  
Kalanaur, Rohtak, Haryana, India

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to study the thematic concerns in the novels of Toni Morrison – *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *The Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*. Morrison has dealt with the themes of violence, oppression and sacrifice in all her novels. The conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have been presented nowhere so effectively in the entire American fiction. Though all her works are suffused with violence, Morrison has dealt with violence in each novel in a unique way.

**Keywords:** violence, oppression, community, culture.

## **Thematic Concerns In The Novels Of Toni Morrison:**

The purpose of this paper is to study the thematic concerns in the novels of Toni Morrison – *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *The Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*. Morrison has dealt with the themes of violence, oppression and sacrifice in all her novels. The conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have been presented nowhere so effectively in the entire American fiction. Though all her works are suffused with violence, Morrison has dealt with violence in each novel in a unique way.

In all her major novels Toni Morrison has dwelt upon the theme of violence, oppression and sacrifice. In Morrison's novels violence exhibits its various forms. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* begins with Pecola Breedlove's sufferings and psychological disintegration. There is guilt, a sense of hopelessness and an image of the wasteland all around. "Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. ... It never occurred to us that the earth itself might be unyielding. ... What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth"(9).

The very first chapter describes the violent pasts of Pecola Breedlove's mother and father and ends with the rape of a daughter by her own father, the story of a pedophile-Soaphead Church and the destruction of a wretched dog. The second chapter depicts only violence, madness and oppression of the blacks by the dominant whites. This violence is motivated by self-loathing and self-hatred that expresses itself and seeks liberation in the sacrifice of a young girl, Pecola Breedlove. The ordinary violence is repeated time and again as Pecola is victimized not only by her mother and father but by other members of the black community in Lorain who identify themselves not with their own community but with their oppressors. All this reveals how a young girl Pecola Breedlove becomes the victim of an entire community's frustration, hatred and humiliation. *The Bluest Eye* tries to start several times to name the trauma, yet each fails. Claudia identifies the cause of the trauma and the condition of the community for which the sterility of the ground is an apt metaphor. Yet the real cause of their agony and violence in the community remains unnamable. The origins of violence in oppression are so difficult to uncover because of the scapegoat system prevalent in the community. The purpose of the scapegoat is to darken the root causes of violence and to reassign blame for everything to one defenceless girl, in Lorain's case, Pecola Breedlove.

Violence in *Sula* is more destructive than that of *The Bluest Eye*. Here it is unmistakable, graphic and undeniable. More than one character is burnt alive and large numbers are buried alive and drowned. There are fights, plagues of robins, ice storms, collapsing bridges and casual humiliations. The novel, in fact, is a chronicle of the slow destruction over time of the entire community of the bottom. Many critics of *Sula* believe that oppression is at the heart of the violence. And the oppression the community suffers can easily be attributed to the community's origins in "a nigger joke". But the "nigger joke" that opens this novel acts merely as a metonymy for oppression by the dominant whites and does not name that oppression as the source of violence within the community. Reddy aligns Jude's marriage to Nel with the death of Nel's inner self and asserts that it is merely an escape from one form of oppression to another:

Both have internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the white capitalist society that says that one's value as a man is determined by one's work and by that work's economic

rewards, including ownership of a woman and children, and that one's value as a woman is determined by one's ability to attract a man and to provide that man with children (35).

The economic and political powerlessness of the black community makes it vulnerable to white society's "explosive self aggrandizement". However, violence among the blacks stems not only directly from their economic oppression, but also from their willingness to adopt the dominant culture's values and to align themselves with their oppressors. The violence ultimately leads to guilt and anger like that witnessed in Lorain in *The Bluest Eye* and to the community's search for a scapegoat. After Sula's death the community is worse off than it was.

Rene Girard writes that "acts of violence gradually wear away the differences that exist not only in the same family but throughout the community"(48). He defines the sacrificial crisis as a "crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their identity and their mutual relationships"(49). Sula predicts the escalation of the crisis of difference in the future.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's third novel violence is less pervasive than it is in her two previous novels. Here too violence stems from the pressure that the white society places on the black community to abandon their traditional values and to adopt white values of materialism. Here the familiar pattern of revenge and mutual violence emerge in obvious terms with the introduction of 'Seven Days' a group of seven black men sworn to kill a white person for every black murdered by the whites. As in all Morrison's other novels, this violence within the society leads to sacrifice. Here is Pilate another defenceless girl who becomes scapegoat for the society.

*Tar Baby* marks a subtle departure from the more physical violence of Morrison's earlier novels to the psychological torment, child abuse, abandonment and discrimination. Still violence is here in the shape of Valerian Street's inhuman behaviour who keeps berating and embarrassing his wife. His wife is too guilty of physically tormenting their infant son. Once again, through Jadine and Son, Morrison depicts the characters who represent two sides of a culture question. This novel too emphasizes the question more effectively without giving any solution. Though *Tar Baby* comes much nearer to naming the source of violence it fails naming a way to overcome it.

In *Beloved* Morrison's fifth novel, violence emerges from slavery and oppression. *Beloved* departs from Morrison's earlier works in its willingness to identify violence among blacks as a direct response to oppression by the dominant white culture. Here Morrison presents a society once bonded through love and mutual respect, ripped apart by violence and envy but violence enters long before Sethe murders her daughter. Whipping, shootings and other physical abuse dominate the scenes Paul D. and Sethe describe from their lives as slaves. In *Beloved* there is a solution as the members of the oppressed communities realize that they can survive only through a revival of communal values.

Dorothea Mbalia describes *Beloved* as the "personification of individual needs and desires"(90). She argues that Paul D's presence "sets in motion the necessary purgative confrontation between Sethe, *Beloved* and the Cincinnati African community" (91). Thus the struggle in the novel becomes the community's struggle for coherence and solidarity in the face of individual need. In *Beloved*, Mbalia says, "Life is hell but togetherness, shared experience, and brotherly/sisterly love help the characters to survive, If not to forge better lives for themselves"(91).

The effects of and motivation for violence in Morrison's novels are as distinct in each case as her variations in narrative strategy. In *The Bluest Eye* the narrators tell their story through flashbacks, backward-looking stories within the forward moving plot. A different use emerges in *Sula*. Here Morrison titles the chapters according to a particular year, i.e., 1929, 1932, 1931 etc. However those

chapters tell events from characters' past-events which take in the place leading up to title years. . Linda Wagner frequently makes reference to the repetition of patterns in Morrison's novels, especially *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Wagner notices that not only is National Suicide Day a recurrent motif in the novel, but also that Morrison repeats the metaphor[s] of confinement, possession, security"(198).In *Tar Baby* Morrison uses the recursive narrative strategy in a less obvious way. Infact the narrative strategy in all of Morrison's novels echoes the narrative element in the psychoanalytic process. The narrative pattern in *Beloved* too closely resembles the story telling in the psychoanalytic process.

### References:

- [1] Christian,Barbara.[1980], "Community and Nature:The novels of Toni Morrison."Journal of Ethnic Studies 7.4,pp.65-78.
- [2] Clark,Norris[1980], " Flying Black:Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,Sula*,and *Song of Solomon*."Minority Voices: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature and Arts 4.2 pp 51-63
- [3] Hilfer,Anthony c.[1991], "Toni Morrison's Critical Indeterminacies."Texas Studies in Literature 33.1,pp 91-95.
- [4] Holloway,Karla F.C and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos[1987], "New Dimensions of Spirituality:A Biracial and Bicultural reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison".New York: Greenwood.
- [5] Irving John.[1981], "Morrison's Black Fable." The New York Times Book Review,30-31.
- [6] Tate,Claudia ed.[1983] "*Black Women Writers At Work*."New York: Continuum.