PSYCHE OF THE BLACK CHARACTERS
IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

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THE PURPOSE OF STUDY

Toni Morrison enjoys today the unique distinction of being both a popular writer and an outstanding literary figure in African-American Literature. Through her powerful narratives, she has captivated the hearts of common readers as well as scholars of Literature. She got National Book Award nomination and Ohioana Book Award, both 1975 for ‘Sula’; National Book Critics Circle Award and American Academy and Institute of Arts and letters Award, both 1977, for ‘Song of Solomon’; New York State Governor’s Arts Award 1986. She was the first recipient of the Washington College Literary award, 1987; National Book Award nomination and National Book Critics Circle Award nomination, both 1987, Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Robert F. Kennedy Award, both 1988, all for ‘Beloved’; Elizabeth Cady Stanton Award from National organization for women. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for her outstanding contribution to literature. The numerous awards she has received bear testimony to her genius as a writer.

She astutely describes aspects of the blacks’ lives and especially of the blacks as the people they are. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world as ugly, but the uniqueness of Toni
Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and the hope beneath the surface of black America. Combining the aims of the black Freedom Movement and women's liberation, she seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black.

Through the novels such as:-

The Bluest Eye (1970)
Sula (1973)
Song of Solomon (1977)
Tar Baby (1981)
Beloved (1987)
Jazz (1992)
Paradise (1998)
Love (2003)
A Mercy (2008)

Toni Morrison has earned a reputation as a gifted storyteller whose troubled characters seek to find themselves and their cultural riches in a society that warps or impedes such essential. To put in Faulkner's phrase, her novels "Grieve on universal bones" and she stands in the vanguard of contemporary writers of fiction.

The purpose of present study is to search for the psyche of the Black characters in the novels of Toni Morrison.
The Social, Political and economical factors contributed a lot in making Toni Morrison a novelist of a special class, gender and race. In ‘The Bluest Eye’, the African families, for their socio-economic status and political advancement, exploit their own brethren in order to become close to the ruling class. One such family is Peals. Although the reader is introduced to only one member of this family, Maureen, her appearance, behavioural patterns and remarks offer sufficient glimpses of consciousness of the Peals. By dissociating itself from the African community, the second family, Geraldine Louis and Louis Junior also nurture the aspirations of the ruling class. They consider themselves to be coloured, signifying some nebulous group of Africans who are neither European nor African: coloured people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. The third family, the Elihu Micah Whitcombs, is so obsessed with the physical appearances of Europeans that they jeopardize their mental stability by intermarrying, only to maintain some semblance of whiteness. Toni Morrison’s novels are full of such instances, which denote the upbringing of the blacks living among the whites.

Racism is a man made phenomenon, in other worlds white skin brings with it cultural superiority —that the white are more intelligent and more virtuous than the black by the mere fact of being white. The lives of African-Americans have been critically affected by racism, sexism, and
classism, which are systems of societal and psychological restrictions. The racist, sexist and classiest structure of the American society compartmentalizes its various ethnic groups, denigrates the coloured as inferior and characterizes males and females as centre and margin respectively. Just as blacks as a group are relegated to an underclass by virtue of their race, women are relegated to a separate caste by virtue of their sex. In 'The Bluest Eye' there are many incidents in the novel which hurt Pecola into a feeling of isolation and pain because of her race. Her encounter with a fifty-two-year-old white storekeeper makes her aware that for many people she does not really exist. Not only the whites, even the black boys taunt her at school. She becomes the scapegoat for her own humiliation and pain. Pecola's mother, who works as a house keeper in a white family, lavishes all her love and affection on her employer's children, reserving her jibes and slap for her own hapless daughter. Black colour is a black spot on the fortune of Toni Morrison's characters, which has to be removed with strenuous struggle.

Toni Morrison's natural inclination is on gender focus as the females in the black society are doubly oppressed. First by the whites and secondly by their own people (the males). Nel and Sula- the two black friends-growing into that womanhood that serves as the periscope through which the tremendous contradictions of life are viewed. Both black, smart, poor, and
raised in a small Ohio town, Sula and Nel meet when they are twelve, wishbone thin and dreaming of princes. Through their girlhood years they share everything until Sula escapes the Bottom, their hilltop neighborhood of fierce resentment toward failed crops, lost jobs, thieving insurance man and buy ridden flour. Sula roams the cities of America for ten years, and when she returns to town she finds Nel married and acculturated to life at the Bottom while Sula is considered the oddity of the community. Thus Toni Morrison’s primary emphasis here is on gender, especially individualism of the African women.

Within the features of white society, the blacks are bound to develop a different psyche. On the psychological level, whiteness is automatically equated with beauty and culture and blackness with ugliness and slavery. The black man faced with the hard fact, and cruel reality of racism realized right from the days of slavery that his colour and physiognomy were terrible handicaps, and as such would mark him off as evil, despite all claims to the contrary. Judged by the white man’s standards of life, behaviour and beauty, his life became unbearable. Universal codes of social and psychological praxis as laid down by the dominant white culture were forcibly thrust upon him.

In Toni Morrison’s novel ‘The Bluest Eye’, a black girl, Pecola undergoes all the traumatic experiences. She wants to rise up out of the pit
of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes, but the pity is that she is not allowed to excluded from reality by racial discrimination and inequality.

Pecola goes mad, fantasizing that her eyes have turned blue and so fitted her for the world. She has lost her balance of mind. Toni Morrison’s purpose in showing us the psychic state and the resultant behaviour of Pecola under the pressure of white domination is to expose the vicious genocidal effects of racism on the black girls, thereby raising the question of what it means to be black in a racist society.

Toni Morrison’s suffering class naturally crave for an individuality. A search for self has become a dominant feature in almost all the characters. Milkman’s quest for self or identity is the dominant strand in the novel ‘Song of Solomon’, the major obstacle he must overcome is the deadening effects of capitalism. Milkman is accidently propelled on his search of his desire for gold.

Though Toni Morrison’s novel ‘Sula’ is fundamentally a women’s novel, it concentrates itself on the search of self. For Nel and Sula the problem of one’s loss of identity is a direct result of the Bottom’s limiting definition of women as subservient, self sacrificing beings. Nel assumes the traditional role the community prescribes, and retain her social identity, though her personal identity is non-existent. Sula, by contrast, is a free spirited woman whose determination to define herself places her at odds
with the culturally rich black community. Hers is the psychological dilemma out of touch with the historic black past. In their quests for self Toni Morrison's characters find their world rife with contradictions and tensions.

Toni Morrison ranks worldwide with great masters-Dostoevsky and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Like these writers Toni Morrison's ultimate message is that each person should and must respect the reality of the human landscape of the world with its unlimited possibilities and interpretations if mankind is to achieve wholeness and if global community is to once again be whole.

Many critics consider Toni Morrison as a master of human psychology whose dealing with the black people's psyche is remarkably deep and wonderfully human. But there are some others who regard her as a writer with limits, one who can only record the black life. Through the unfolding of blacks' mind and heart, are the readers able to get an almost complete view of their inner selves? Whether Toni Morrison is able to create a genuine and sympathetic understanding of the blacks? Is she a representative of the oppressed class of humanity as a whole?

This has to be accounted for.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>About the Writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>The Background of their creation-Social, Political &amp; Economical conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>Struggle against Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>Focus on Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>Psychological Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>Quest for Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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PRIMARY SOURCES


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SECONDARY SOURCES


