CHAPTER – I

ABOUT THE WRITER

Afro-American novel is essentially a social and human document which deals with the man and the social milieu. Afro-American novel primarily deals with the exploitation of the blacks and quest for identity with psychological and socio-economic dimensions to it.

The Afro-Americans were first brought to America and sold on an auction block as slaves, they were subordinated by the whites and in due course of time these slaves were deprived of the language, symbols, beliefs, traditions, religion and institutions they once had in Africa. The white masters used them as commodities, bringing them down to the level of subhuman beings. They became victims of racism, and served the needs of white capitalist masters.

Though the African-Americans were not colonized like the black people in Africa, their predicament was no better. Slavery empowered the whites to enforce their designs over black bodies. Naturally this led to self-hatred and the Blacks become victims of self-negation. After the civil war, though slavery was abolished in America, the Blacks were unable to recover from the straining of the inhuman experience and psycho-social scars. As a result, for a long time, the
African-Americans in general could not regain their real, authentic black self.

A community which has experienced a long period of socio-economic exploitation in the past cannot forget it, even though it made some progress. Most Afro-American writers carry the burden of their race in their art and literature. They also try to highlight how the dominant ideology of racism, the class exploitation and the cultural hegemony of the whites are responsible for their plight.

Once the white man established his domination over the blacks through his ideology of racism and sexism and his cultural hegemony, the black man’s notion of his own ‘self’ got completely eroded. This loss of selfhood traumatically affected his psyche. Consequently, this lack of esteem of self as an object not worthy of love had grave consequences; it kept the individual in a statue of profound inner insecurity.

The culture of the ruling class assumes supremacy. The ideas of the ruling class become dominant ideas and the culture that establishes the upper hand over the other culture establishes hegemony over the subordinate class. Most of the writers believe that if you destroy the culture of a group of people than in due course of time you also destroy them.

American literature, says Morrison, has been based on certain set of assumptions, a kind of knowledge. This ‘knowledge’ holds that
traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uniformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year old presence of, first, Africans, and then African-Americans in the United States. In her non-fictional prose work, *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, she goes on to explore how the black presence or absence had influenced and shaped American literature, in other words, white literature.

American literary tradition is very wide and complex, one of its many strands is the Afro-American literature. Awareness of being black is the most powerful and pivotal source of inspiration for Negro writers in America. Consciousness of being black has inculcated an especial intensity among early American Negro writers. It was in the early decades of 20th century that the Negro found a new and audible voice of protest against the harassment, exploitation done by the White Americans. Because of their unique position in American culture, African-American novelists have drawn attention to the marginalization of blacks in White American society, and the irrationality of the color line that prevents blacks from a full and free participation in American life.

African-American experience has been marked by both struggle and triumph. Black American literature came into being in the 1920’s, the heyday of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance. By the 1920’s, Harlem was the largest community of black individuals in the world, encompassing Africans, people from the West Indies, the
Caribbean, and the Americans. Important writers of this era include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude Mackay, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. These younger writers were encouraged by the older, established writers, critics, and editors including W.E.B. DuBois and Charles S. Johnson. The Harlem Renaissance paved the way for power through art to inspire the masses and the writers of the 1960s. Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Gloria Naylor are examples of successful women authors who have become prominent figures in the late twentieth century Afro-American literature.

Toni Morrison is one of the most sophisticated novelists in the history of African American novelists. Her creations are wonderful and aesthetic because Toni Morrison tries to reveal the beauty and hope beneath the surface of Black America. During this process she unifies the aims of Women’s Liberation and the Black freedom movement. Indisputably her literature is the saga of black people. At the same time, she achieves a balance between writing a black literature and writing universal literature. Her novels exhibit universal themes, having the firm foundation in the cultural and social heritage of black Americans. She has a great sense of history and art of storytelling with love, depth and beauty.

To understand Toni Morrison’s novel, one will have to go through the socio-economic and political conditions under which African
American lived in white America. There are situations and systems of sociological and psychological restrictions that have influenced the black people in general and African American women in particular.

The slave history reveals that the blacks irrespective of sex had been facing the cruel facts of racism. In comparison to white man’s standards of life and beauty, the black man’s life was unbearable. There was sexual exploitation, physical and mental. Black women were sexually exploited by both the black and white men. Blacks were treated as an underclass by the virtue of their race and so the black women were considered inferior to black men by the virtue of their sex. They were discriminated racially and sexually. Without any favor or help they had to be liable and responsible for their own and their children’s future and well being. The ideal southern woman was expected to be beautiful in ornamental way, chaste, married and naturally a mother. But only the white women were able to follow these norms easily. On the other hand black women could not even think of these norms. Barbara aptly writes:

They had to work, most could not be ornamental or withdrawn from the word; and according to the aesthetics of the country, they were not beautiful and neither was they men. Any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part, qualities necessary for participation in work world was constructed as unwomanly and tasteless. (72)
The social and political situations forced the black people to remain poor and weak. White masters of land brought the first Africans in chains and made them rich by using them as laborers. Black people could not remain human beings in the white world. Gloria Wade Gayles explains that there were three major circles of reality in American society. The first is a large circle in which the white people experience influence and power. In the second circle, the black people experience uncertain exploitation and powerlessness regardless of sex. Hidden in this second circle, there is third, a small dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. Being black the African women suffered from social prejudice and being female they became the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of white patriarchs and being slaves they were compelled to remain poor. We study this social oppressive story in America. This study has pain, bloodshed, death and above all negation of an entire race. They were persecuted and viciously outlawed from all kinds of decency, hope and progress. Joel Kovel says that the white masters:

First reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then body to a thing, he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable and there by absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange. (18)
Not only this humiliation, there was another fact and it was the
disgrace, the black woman suffered at the hands of her own man. Despite
all sympathy for his abused wife, the black man gradually developed a
kind of aversion to her. He also began to see her as a loose woman who
preferred extra marital adventures to marital performance. He felt
neglected and took his woman to be his enemy. So the black woman was
deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection.

One should not avoid the economical issues or class factors, though
this class struggle has not been a major issue. Economical exploitation is
perhaps the greatest source of oppression of black people. There was
some improvement in the economic condition of black people, after civil
war, which gave some liberation to them. Instantly the First World War
hit them hard. A great depression posed further threats to the African
American populations. As a matter of fact, to the millions of common
people in America, irrespective of race nothing seemed as urgent as
survival in a world of unemployment and economic collapse. And blacks
were in the worst situation. So we cannot ignore the class issue or
capitalism.

Capitalism is an economic system that shows in a few hands the
ownership, the means of producing wealth and unequal distribution of the
products of human labor. It is system which:
Divides society into classes (sections of people who get their living in the same way), one which carries out the actual process of production (slave, serf, and wage-worker) while the other (slave owner, lord capitalist, and employer) enjoys a part of the product without having to work produce it. (Burns, 54)

The class that owns the means of production is the ruling or the capitalist class. It means to serve the interests of only one class of people and to impose this will on all the other groups. The ruling class secures its place in society and continues exploitation. As a result there exists a permanent sector of unemployed people and periodic economic crisis, incredible poverty, in the mid of wealth and wastage, deviant behavior based on individual interests above group interest. Walter Rodney says that racism is not the main cause of the enslavement of African people. He refuses the argument of those people who say that the racism and sexism are the primary causes of their oppression. He remarks:

Africans were enslaved for economic reasons so that their labor power could be exploited. (Rodney, 99-100)

The economic system of slavery, an early form of capitalism, was the cause of racism and sexism rather than the result of it. Racial differences made it easier to justify and rationalize Negro slavery. The Negro slave was cheaper. This was the main factor. The money, which produced the service of white man for ten years, could buy a Negro for a life. Oppression of African people on purely racial grounds accompanied,
strengthened and became indistinguishable from oppression for economic reasons. Racism and sexism cannot exist under a non-exploitive economic system. The novels of black women from the days of Francis Harper’s Iola Leroy (1892), to the modern times of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), are clearly influenced by social, economical and political situations. Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes were Watching God, shows the suffering of Black woman in sharp edging words:

De white man is de ruler of everything so far as Ah been able thus find out. So ……... (He) throws down the load and tells the nigger man thus pick it up. He picks it up because he has to, but he doesn’t tote it. He hands it to his woman folks. De nigger woman is de mule UN de world so far as Ah can see. (29)

Like other black women novelists of her time, Toni Morrison exhibits all the main sufferings, issues, problems faced by the black people in America. She is very positive and frankly commits herself to the cause and survival of entire black people. She writes in the tradition of all black women writers like Hurston and Paule Marshall, as a cultural feminist celebrating the black power, showing aesthetic consciousness. In her novels, she tries to incorporate the essentials of the past into her fiction. Her autobiographical recall includes not just the names, places and events of her past, but the flavor, the values, the sustaining intangibles of the life, she remembers as she was growing up in the
1930’s and 1940’s with proud, resourceful parents committed to living their way of life in their own terms. Toni Morrison’s personal landscape-the environment, in which she was born and brought up, has become the colorful and complex life of many of her fictional characters.

Toni Morrison was born on 18 February, 1931 in the small town of Lorain Ohio. She was one of the four children of Ramah Willis Wafford, a homemaker who sang in the church choir and of George Wafer, who held a variety of jobs including car washer, steel mill welder, road construction and shipyard work. From her parents and grandparents Morrison received a legacy of resistance to oppression and exploitation as well as an appreciation of African American folklore and cultural practices. Her maternal grandparents emigrated from Alabama to Ohio in hopes of leaving racism and poverty behind and finding greater opportunities for their children. Her father likewise left Georgia to escape the racial violence that was rampant there.

Toni Morrison originally named Chloe Anthony Wofford, left Lorain in 1949 to attend Howard University (where she changed her name to Toni). She earned B.A. degree in 1953 from Howard University and M.A. in English at Cornell University where she completed a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia wolf. She married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, and had two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. Toni Morrison regarded the marriage:
As part of the stifling situation that led her to turn to writing for
solace during the early 1960s. (508)

The marriage ended in divorce in 1964. Then, she moved to New
York. She worked there as a senior editor at Random House. Morrison
nourished the concerns of several writers, including the Toni Cade,
Barbara, Gayle Jones, Angela Davis and Henry Dumas. She resumed her
teaching career, serving as visiting professor at Yale between 1976 and
1978.

In 1987, Toni Morrison was named the Robert F. Goheen professor
in the council of humanities at Princeton University. She became the first
black woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League University.
She taught creative writing and also took part in the African-American
studies, and women’s studies programs. Toni Morrison has emerged as
one of the major contemporary Afro-American novelists on the literacy
scene of American literature. She is the author of nine novels so far-

Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is the story of a year
in the life of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl in Ohio who comes to
believe that she has blue eyes. She endures degradations, including incest
with her father and subsequent pregnancy, until her fixation with blue
eyes of a friend’s doll degenerates into insanity.

Morrison’s second novel, *Sula* which was published in 1973 won
an Ohioan Book Award. With this novel Morrison ventures into treatment
of female friendship, exploring the dynamics of the relationship between two women, Sula Peace and Nel Wright. The novel not only narrates the story of how Sula and Nel become friends, but also the implications of the rift that separates them when one chooses a traditional life of marriage and family and the other chooses independence from traditional expectations from women.

In her third novel, *Song of Solomon* published in 1977, Morrison narrates a complex tale of a black man, Milkman Dead, and his search to understand himself in the context of family history and racial politics. Weaving memories of his own family stories of relatives who lost land during reconstruction, *Song of Solomon* chronicles Milkman’s journey from the North back to the South to the very places and people of his ancestry that his middle-class life had encouraged him to devalue. Ian Ousby said about *Song of Solomon*:

Is an intricate narrative about Milkman Dead’s exploration of his family history, his quest for a place as an individual within a heritage of slavery and violence? (652)

Morrison uses her fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), to synthesize an interest in racial politics and the African Diaspora with gender relations. A love affair between a black upper middle class model and art historian, Jadine Childs, and Son Green, the uneducated Stowaway who intrudes in the Caribbean island mansion of her wealthy white benefactors, illustrates
Morrison’s interest in debates about how blackness and authenticity get defined in the African American community.

Morrison achieves her great strength as a novelist in *Beloved* (1987), the winner of her first major award, the Pulitzer Prize. Set in the middle 1870s, when race relations in America were at their most crucial juncture (slavery having ended and the course of the South’s Reconstruction not yet fully determined), this novel shows a mother (Sethe) being haunted and eventually destroyed by the ghost of a daughter (Beloved) whom she had killed eighteen years earlier rather than let her be taken by a vicious slave master. About this novel Nina Baym said:

This novel is central to Morrison’s canon because it involves so many important theme and techniques, form love and guilt to history’s role in clarifying the past’s influence on the present, all told in a style of magical realism that transforms (without denying) more mundane facts. (2078)

Her sixth novel *Jazz* (1992), a novel inspired by her reading in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* about a young woman who, as she lay dying, refused to identify her lover as the person who shot her, Morrison combines the history and music of the Harlem Renaissance with a fascination with New York City, the story of a stale marriage, and a fatal love affair.
Morrison’s seventh novel *Paradise* (1998) is a whirlwind of narration whose plot is less fascinating in some ways than the way it is told. *Paradise* in which we know that one of the girls at the convent is white we even now from the first sentence that “the shoot the white girl first”. Yet we are never sure which girl is white. This implication of this work is that racial discrimination is real and devises, but also that the relationship between individual identity and racial identity is confusing regardless of perspective. Morrison also forces the reader to question his or her own racial stereotype. *Paradise* tells the story of a convent, a place where women can exist free from the pressures of contemporary society, on the margins of an all Black town in Oklahoma. The town of Ruby developed from a town called Haven in the late nineteenth century. The purpose of which was to provide a safe, segregated place for blacks to flourish as they moved west following Reconstruction. The violence that opens the novel and the irony of the title suggest that such notions of exclusion are not the best response to a long history of oppression.

Morrison’s eighth novel *love* (2003) is a much bit as ironic as *Paradise*. At the very least, Morrison is trying to get her readers to reassess the meaning of notions such as love and paradise, which are too often confused with pleasantry. Love can be a violent force in Morrison’s fiction, and it has the power to kill. This novel is another attempt to come to terms with the destructive or murderous passion that is part of love.
Morrison’s ninth and most recent novel *A Mercy* was published in 2008 reveals what lies beneath the surface of slavery in early America. In this novel, Morison examines the roots of racism going back to slavery’s earliest days, providing glimpses of the various religious practices of the time, and showing the relationship between men and women in early America. Often excellence of Morrison’s fiction lies in achieving a balance between writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature.

Toni Morrison’s novels reflect her desire to draw on the people, places, language, values, cultural tradition, and politics that have shaped her own life and that of African-American people. She astutely describes aspects of the black’s lives and especially of blacks’ as the people they are.

Toni Morrison’s literary honors include both the national book critics circle Award and the American Academy and institute of Arts and Letters Award for *Song of Solomon* in 1977. Prior to it, in 1974, *Sula*, her second novel was nominated for National Book Award. *Beloved*, in 1988, her fifth novel receives Pulitzer Prize, and in 1992, *Jazz*, is a best seller. For her collective achievement Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, the first Afro-American writer to be so honored. In its statement the Swedish Academy praised her as one:
Who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality? (Praised by Swedish Academy)

Toni Morrison, along with her contemporaries, Black women novelists, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, and Tessy McMillan, is widely read by a broader section of the American reading public. Toni Morrison’s devoted readers are found on every continent, including both sexes of all ages, and creeds. Her Song of Solomon was the first Black Book of the month club selection since Richard Wright’s Native Son in 1940. Tar Baby (1981) was on the best seller lists for four months.

Despite these successes Morrison’s work has not always been received well by critics and readers. For example, The Bluest Eye (1970) her first novel, was out of point by 1974, just for years after its publication. Beloved (1987) failed to win the National Book Award in 1987 as many expected. In protest, forty-nine black writers published a letter in a New York Times.

Toni Morrison’s preoccupation with race factor is natural, given the background in which she grew up. She was an heir to the family history of loss, dispossession and racial discrimination on both the sides-paternal and maternal. Her father George Wofford, coming from a family of Georgia share-croppers migrated North with his family and retained
bitter memories of racial bigotry and violence. Her maternal grandparents, who had been sharecroppers in Greenville, too had moved from the South having lost their land in racial feuds. Alongside, Morrison inherited a rich African-American oral tradition and absorbed a range of traditional folktales, songs and myths from her parents and grant parents. These two major influences of her Childhood guided her choice of themes and techniques considerably.

Toni Morrison asserted in 1974, in an interview: I want to participate in developing a canon of black work. (Interview with Toni Morrison, 30) Indeed, Morrison has not only participated in the evolving canon of Black American Literature but has done much to influence, expand, and solidify the place created by its vanguard. Toni Morrison talking about her work says:

I am really happy when I read something, particularly about black people, when it is not so simple winded...........when it is not set up in some sociological equation where all the villains do this and all the whites are heroes, because it just makes black people boring and they are not. I have never met yet a boring black person. All you have to do is scratch the surface and you will see. And that is because of the way they look at life. (Weems and Samuels, 1)

In real life, her immediate models are firstly, her grandmother, who left her home in the south with seven children and thirty dollars in hands, because she feared white sexual violence against her maturing daughters,
and secondly, her mother who took ‘humiliating jobs’, in order to send Morrison money regularly while she was in college. Being a woman writer Toni Morrison is well aware of both the burdens and the blessings of the past. In an interview she asserts:

In all the history of black women, we have been both the ship and the harbor-we can do things one at a time, or four things at a time if we have to. (Interview with Nellie Y. Mckay, 413-14)

In Toni Morrison’s early life, the most prominent elements were black lore, black music, black language, and all the myths and rituals of black culture. Her grandfather played the violin, her parents told thrilling and terrifying ghost stories, and her mother sang and played the numbers by decoding the dream symbols as they were manifest in a dream book that she kept. In her adolescence she read the Great Russian, French and English novels and was impressed by the quality of their specific cure or remedy. In her writing she strives to capture the richness of black culture through its specificity. She is also clearly influenced by the magical picturing in art and literature of people and thing as they really appear to be of Gabriel Marquez and his Latin American contemporaries. Toni Morrison herself asserts the aim of her writings, as she declares:

I also want my work to capture the vast imagination of black people. That is, I want my books to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shared day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they
encompass some great supernatural element. We know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So, all the parts of living are on an equal footing.

(409)

Toni Morrison is, perhaps, the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of Afro-American literature, whose work has been described as ‘Amazingly high,’ she astutely describes aspects of the blacks, lives and especially of blacks as the people they are. The Uniqueness of Toni Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and the hope beneath the surface of black America. With the diversity of black women's lives now acknowledged in literature, African-American women writers search for new ways to express old and new situations and silences. Using blues and jazz, black urban speech contemporary music, history, science, fiction, beams; these women speak out in their own characteristic way.

Woman must write herself, must write about woman and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies …….woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history – by her own movement. 

(Cixous, 4)

What is the most important about the black woman writer is: Her special and unique vision of the black woman……….one of the main preoccupations of the black woman writer has been the
black woman herself-her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationship
to her men and her children, and her creativity………that these
writers have first-hand knowledge of their subject ought to be
enough to commend attention. (Washington, 10)

As a black artist and a black feminist, Morrison explores
descriptively the problems of black society i.e. self consciousness,
positive self-identity, and self realization in an oppressive and blatantly
sexist and racist modern society. She explores the woman on the grounds
of the woman especially of being a colored one. All black fiction of
significance in America is modern fiction and what we expect of
modernism in general, we expect of this literature as well: complexity of
expression, exclusiveness of meaning, opposition to established and
traditional systems, social and aesthetic, a tendency towards
fragmentation, elements of violence, a certain self-consciousness of
modernity itself.

Nowhere else in America is the social terrain more complex and
contradictory than where a racial minority and the ‘weaker’ gender
intersect. By virtue of her race and gender the black woman writer Toni
Morrison finds herself at two points of intersection: one where western
culture cuts across vestiges of African heritage, and one where male
female attitudes are either harmoniously parallel, subtly divergent, or in
violent collision. Toni Morrison’s novels tell us what it means to be a
human, in a condition not entirely determined by genetic makeup but is also comprised of conscious volition.

As a result her fictional characters engage in perplexing struggles to maintain their human dignity and emotional sensitivity in an impersonal, alien and frequently threatening world. With one penetrating glance she cuts through layers of institution allied racism and sexism and uncovers a core of social contradictions and intimate dilemmas which plague every one regardless of race and gender. What distinguishes Morrison’s fiction from autobiographical strategies is her ‘reliance on the image’. In addition to ‘recollection’ she relies on picture and the feelings that accompany the picture. In her fiction sensuality is embedded in the past and sensual descriptions explode the effects of alienation and repression.

With her powerful narratives set against a historical as well as mythical backdrop, Morrison has captivated the hearts of the common readers as well as scholars of literature. In her novels she depicts the problems of black people and tries to understand and interpret them. Morrison in 1974 stated, ‘what we (blacks) have to do is to introduce ourselves’. Morrison indentifies with her readers and labors to achieve intimacy with them. She invites readers to share in the creative process, to work with her in constructing meaning in the books. Morrison encourages participatory reading.
Morrison’s work is not predictable. While her language, metaphors, settings, and themes evoke the familiar and timeless her characters seldom reinforce the reader’s expectations not because they are unrealistic, but because they often depict a reality that is too distressing to consider. Through her work, Morrison shows what an extraordinary and unspeakable act ordinary people are capable of committing.
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