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The Social, Political and Artistic Impact of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's contribution to literature as a writer, theoretician, social-scientist, and African American aesthetician is unparallel, and she has redefined the canon of American studies, her passing away has left an enormous void not only in African American literature, but in the world literature. She has given a voice to the prominent figures of Black power movement, including Muhammad Ali, Huey Newton, George Jackson and Angela Davis by publishing them. Among many major awards, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1988 and she went on to win the Nobel prize in 1993. In a 2016 interview with Nadifa Mohamed, Morrison applauded the BLM movement for the awareness that it generated. Her work never derisively attacks White American values, but she makes a case for African American ideology with such a captivating intensity that she validates the African American worldview. Her works are deeply psychoanalytic and she is also mindful of the class distinction while she is reflecting upon Black American issues concerning their self-image, the effects of cultural alienation and violence, and that of dehumanizing ideologies upon them. Moreover, she discusses these issues in the realm of African American aesthetics while using Black-American folklore, music, myths, idioms and oral history that form the backdrop of all her major literary works. The absence of Morrison is not only an immense void in the lives of the African Americans, but she is looked up as a person who spoke for the rights of the disadvantaged and discriminated minorities and

marginal communities. Her novels are exemplary in adapting folktales and folk wisdom, and musical forms like blues, jazz and spirituals.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, African American, Black Aesthetics, Mainstream literature, Slave Narrative, Angela Davis.

Toni Morrison, the revolutionary and the most influential African American writer passed away at the age of eighty-eight on the 5th of August 2019. She has left an enormous void not only in African American literature, but in the world literature. Toni Morrison's unparallel body of work in the field of fiction, black aesthetics and political traditions has helped in shaping the strategies and contributed to the pedagogical tools in reading and analysing African American literature. Her contribution to literature as a writer, theoretician, social-scientist, and African American aesthetician is unparallel, and she has redefined the canon of American studies. Morrison has been very vocal about her political views in the incredible body of work that she has produced, and this in turn, has redefined the socio-political presence of African Americans. Her fictional works, theoretical essays and her formidable political presence has revised the perception and reformulated the ways in which critics, readers and enthusiasts of literature look at African-American presence today.

Morrison's outstanding presence in the literary field besides giving a voice to the aspirations of African Americans, has helped in shaping and redefining the canon of African American literature. When Morrison dawned at the literary scene beginning with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* in the 1970's, there was scant interest in African American literary tradition in the American academy. She has helped in situating African American literature in the purview of the writerly. Her novel *Beloved* is remarkable not only because it is a slave narrative written by a Black woman, and that it encapsulates the experiences of a black women in slavery, but it has also relocated the slave narrative tradition into the domain of the writerly from the readerly. Her brilliant legacy includes notable fictional works like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love*

(2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), *God Help the Child* (2015), *Recitatif* (2022). She wrote a play titled *Desdemona,* her significant non fictional works include *Playing in the Dark* (1992), *Race-Ing Justice, En-gendering Power* (1992), *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation* (1984), *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (2019). She has also contributed to Children's literature along with her son Slade Morrison whom she lost in 2010, these books include *Please Louise* and *Little Cloud and Lady Wind*.

As an editor at the Random House, Morrison used her position to give voices to, and publish the works of major Black writers like Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Muhammad Ali, June Jordan, Gayl Jones and so many others. They are available to us for Morrison defied the publishing industry and took the impetus of publishing them. Morrison besides being committed to the rising women's movement, also helped in the publishing the crucial works associated with these womanists, like the edited collection by Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby titled *America's Working Women: A Documentary History.* She has given a voice to the prominent figures of Black power movement, including Muhammad Ali, Huey Newton, George Jackson and Angela Davis by publishing them. To quote Angela Davis and Farah Jasmine Griffin from *The New York Times* "She helped to create a lasting record that bore witness to the work of activists, marchers and protesters, long after their activity had subsided. She was not an activist in the conventional sense of the word. Instead, and perhaps more significant, she helped to forge a path for future stages of a long struggle." (Davis and Griffin, 2019) In the 1970's Morrison also supervised the efforts to compile a series of impressions that encapsulated the Black experience in the US, the outcome of this research resulted in the publication of *The Black Book*.

All the major Black writers look up to Morrison as their role model, and when her novel *Beloved* did not win the National Book Award for fiction, about forty-eight significant African-American writers and critics came out in her support, in 1988 they wrote an open letter to *The New York Times* titled "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison," that was signed by significant Black writers including, Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Arnold Rampersad, Barbara Christian, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker (24th January, 1988). They stated how an extraordinarily talented African American writer like Morrison has been neglected, and how not only the Pulitzer Prize but all the major

literary awards are her rightful due. Subsequently, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1988 and went on to win the Nobel prize in 1993.

Margaret Burnham (University distinguished professor of law and a civil and human rights lawyer, and director of Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project at Northeastern University) gauges the socio-political impact of Morrison, that Burnham feels went beyond her written word, Burnham invited Toni Morrison for a lecture at Martin Luther King Day," she writes; that "Toni Morrison's fictive work about black life lies at the intersection of memory, history, and trauma." Burnham further reiterates:

"Law alone is an ineffective tool with which to grapple with traumatic memory, and so we have always worked closely with creative writers, visual artists and musicians." (Qtd. in Callahan, 2019)

Morrison's aesthetic brilliance and her deep political sensibility are never antithetical, and she occupied an extraordinary presence on significant political platforms. Interestingly, in the popular realm as well, she emerged as the most sought after Black American writer, who was approached to make serious deliberations on significant contemporary and political issues in America, and on the matters concerning the Black Americans in general. It was the immense popularity of Morrison, that led the Democratic candidates like Clinton and Obama to seek out Morrison to give an endorsement to their presidential candidature. Her lack of prejudice is evident when she praises the former President Bill Clinton in her piece in *The New Yorker* calling him the 'first black President', for according to Morrison he displayed 'almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.' (Morrison, 1998). While endorsing Clinton as the first Black President, she endorsed Barak Obama as the second Black President. In 2012, Obama awarded Morrison the Presidential medal of freedom.
Morrison's deep sense of political responsibility encouraged her to come out with a public statement on the election of Donald Trump. She assesses how and why the Republican President won; her essay titled "Mourning for Whiteness" was published in

The New Yorker on 21st November, 2016 at the election of Donald Trump to Presidential office. Morrison argues that Trump won because the White American's were fearful of losing all the privileges that they have enjoyed in a rapidly diversifying country:

"Under slave laws, the necessity for colour rankings was obvious, but in America today, post-civil-rights legislation, white people's conviction of their natural superiority is being lost. Rapidly lost." Morrison writes, "There are 'people of colour' everywhere, threatening to erase this long-understood definition of America. And what then? Another black President? A predominantly Black Senate? Three Black Supreme Court Justices? The threat is frightening," and this led them to vote for Trump." (Morrison, 2016).

Morrison continued to be vocal on the major issues pertaining to the Black American community till the very end. In a 2016 interview with Nadifa Mohamed, she applauded the BLM movement for the awareness that it generated. Morrison recall's how her father was a witness to the merciless lynching of two Black men, but the newspaper and media reports according to her, never tried to build any public opinion on the plight of Blacks in her father's generation, and she complimented the Black Lives Matter movement in accomplishing this. (Qtd in Mohamed)

Morrison has completely revised the perspective in which mainstream literature looks at the African American presence in literature today. Morrison is also one of the most powerful theorists of our time, and she has deliberated and analysed the portrayal of African Americans in the mainstream Literature. In her critical essays like *Playing in the Dark, Rootedness an Ancestor as Foundation*, *Race-Ing Justice: En-Gendering Power* she assesses the challenges of the logo centrism of White American literature, where the African American presence is merely reduced to a shadow in the mainstream literature. Her work never derisively attacks White American values, but she makes a case for African American ideology with such a captivating intensity that she validates the African American worldview.

Morrison is such an extraordinary storyteller and her body of literature is spiritually invigorating. She renders a compassionate portrayal to the intimate difficulties

encountered by Black Americans on a daily basis, i.e., the issue of white supremacy, racism, slavery, rape and trauma or historical repression. Her works are deeply psychoanalytic and she is also mindful of class distinction while she is reflecting upon Black American issues concerning their self-image, the effects of cultural alienation and violence, and that of dehumanizing ideologies upon them. Moreover, she discusses these issues in the realm of African American aesthetics while using Black-American folklore, music, myths, idioms and oral history that form the backdrop of all her major literary works. Her novels are situated in the cultural and linguistic experiences of the African American community and they exhibit the complex realities of their experiences. Musical forms like Blues, Jazz and Spirituals too are embedded in the matrix of her narrative. She spells out her role as a writer: "My effort is to be like something that has probably been fully expressed in black music.... writing novels is a way to encompass this." (Qtd in Le Clair Pg 21-29) Morrison demonstrates how Black community or a village together helps in shaping the individual's self-knowledge. For Morrison it should be a communitarian endeavour to pass on from one generation to another the mythologies, stories, assumptions that one ethnic group that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream groups keeps intact for its survival.

Carla Kaplan (she is the Davis distinguished Professor of American Literature, and a scholar of modern African-American and women's history and culture), gauges the aesthetic impact of Morrison saying: "She has done for the modern novel what Shakespeare did for theatre," Kaplan said "Almost no one rises to her stature; her work is in a world of its own. Toni Morrison's particular genius about history, large and small is unmatched." Morrison's work is wrenching in its examination of "how deeply and profoundly we hurt each other," while still remaining "almost unspeakably funny at surprising moments," Kaplan said. Kaplan highlights an interesting moment in Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*; A street that had long been known among the local community as "Doctor Street" (because that's where the local doctor once lived), is being renamed by authorities as "Main Street." Government officials put up signs to warn people that it was not 'Doctor Street,' but 'Main Street,' so locals now start calling it "Not Doctor Street." "In that little moment, Morrison captures the way in which the past is

always our propulsion forward," adds Kaplan. "I don't know any writer so incredibly sensitive to that, in the language she uses, as she was." (Qtd in Callahan, 2019)

Morrison's hugely contributed to portraying the experiences of Black women, who rarely saw themselves at the nucleus of their own stories. As an editor she took the initiative to launch a number of new Black voices into the American publishing world. Joshua Barajas, quotes Erroll McDonald editor in Knopf Doubleday division of Penguin Random House, (Morrison was instrumental in starting his career in publishing), who writes:

"Morrison landed in American literary landscape at a time when writers, the American literary establishment branded as Black writers were all male…….One had Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. They were seen as spokesperson for black people. Morrison, as a woman writer, was a pioneer in that sense," Mc Donald adds, "She once said every single book she'd ever written was a love story. And so she brought an interesting sensibility to her writing that may have escaped the male mind." (Qtd in Barajas).

Beyond that, McDonald said, Morrison impacted writers who "understood that the American social fabric was complex and underrepresented for the most part in the old school curriculum." (Qtd in Barajas, 2019).

In a keynote address that Morrison gave in 1975 at Portland state university, she said that "the very serious function of racism is a distraction." "It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being." (Qtd in Barjas, 2019). Besides deliberating on the responsibility of the writers, she cautions of the dangerous intentions of racism and how the 'white gaze' prevented the black writers from standing up for their own issues, rather they were encouraged to write for a white audience, Morrison felt that the 'white gaze' insighted a form of self-flagellation.' Morrison advocates overcoming the 'white gaze' in this manner:

"The little white man that sits on your shoulder and checks out everything you do or say. You sort of knock him off and you're free.' The author then brushes the imaginary figure out of her left shoulder, and says: "Now, I owe the world. I can write about anything, to anyone, for anyone." (Qtd in Barajas, 2019)

For Morrison the act of storytelling is personally and politically restorative. At a personal level storytelling is often coincident with discovery of identity and self-

knowledge. Storytelling is a way of returning to Black American roots in Morrison's fictional world, and her novels *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *Jazz* contain many stories embedded in their narrative. In reclaiming the oral tradition and Black history in her stories, Morrison also shows the invincibility of Black American spirit. Morrison while commenting on her process of recreating the richness of Black Speech in her writing says: "I have to rewrite, discard, and remove the print quality of language, to put back the oral quality, where intonation, volume and gesture are all there." (*Rootedness* Pg 334)

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* was perfectly timed, for it appeared at the verge of the civil rights movement and the Feminist movement in America. This novel is very significant, not only for it is a debut novel, but also because it makes a very strong case for a Black inclusive curriculum in schools and colleges, or for separate schooling institutions for Blacks in America. In *The Bluest Eye,* Morrison depicts the difficulties that the Black community encounters while growing up Black in a white society where the cultural or patriarchal mirror forces black women to judge themselves against the dominant White culture. 'The Dick and Jane reader' in *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how the African-American children are forced to begin with the Master's language. 'The Dick-and-Jane reader' comes to symbolize how white beliefs and ethics are woven into the very texture and the fabric of American life. By prefixing the Black book that Morrison is writing on Pecola's life, and at the same time juxtaposing this Black text with the elementary 'Dick-and-Jane reader,' that symbolises white values, Morrison shows how this school curriculum leads Black children to a poor self-assessment about their self-identity and image. In doing so, Morrison is making a strong case for a Black specific curriculum for children from Black families. *The Bluest Eye* further demonstrates how the medium of popular consumption too, ends up marginalizing the Blacks. The picture of a blue-eyed baby on the bottle of milk makes Pecola long for blue eyes. Morrison shows how every popular opinion, and each hording and billboard that the Breedlove family encounters makes them believe that they are ugly.

Morrison also dwells upon the sacrifices the black women made for survival, or in order to feed their families. Her novels *Sula*, *Beloved* and *Jazz* also portray the strength

of women bonding. Eva in the novel *Sula* sacrifices her leg in order to claim money from the government to feed her starving children. Morrison has created strong women characters like Eva, Pilate, Sula, and Reba. Her novel *Jazz* dwells on how Violet matures in her relationship with Alice and Felice. Beginning with despising Dorcas, we find that Violet eventually realizes that Dorcas could have been the daughter she miscarried, a daughter whose hair she would have liked to dress. Black women Morrison points out, had to bear the triple oppression of gender, race and class. Morrison comments in one of her pieces in the *New York Times* titled "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" on the state of Black women who had had nothing to fall back on; "not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood not anything". (1971, Pg 14)

Morrison turns to the oral tradition to unravel the intricacies of Black history and culture. Her novel *Song of Solomon* was published immediately after *Roots* by Alex Haley, and has a lot in common with *Roots*. In this novel Morrison like Haley acknowledges the depth to the oral tradition, the true legacy of Black people. Interestingly, in this novel the protagonist Milkman goes after his father's legacy, the gold that Macon believes his sister Pilate has hidden somewhere, he travels to his father's homeland in Shalimar, Virginia, and instead he discovers his personal genealogy embedded in the folklore that he has heard Pilate sing since his birth. Pilate resembles the figure of a griot in the African tradition, and she keeps the family history alive in this folklore that she sings. Milkman in Shalimar stumbles upon his family history when the children here chant the folklore about the flying African.

In the evocation of the oral tradition in her novels like *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison shifts the focus from the traditional mainstream histories written by the whites, to the histories of the marginalized in the oral tradition. In *Song of Solomon,* Milkman's quest is unravelled through the name, stories, words and songs that are a part of the collective memories of the 'black community.' She revives the folklore and oral tradition in her novels, as Morrison believes: "we don't live in place where we can hear those stories anymore, parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological and archetypal stories that we heard years ago." (*Rootedness* Pg 340) Her novels are exemplary in adapting folktales and folk wisdom, and musical forms like blues, jazz, spirituals. Morrison herself acknowledges the centrality of jazz music to her

work, for Morrison: "A novel written in a certain way can do precisely what the spirituals used to do. It can do exactly what blues, jazz or gossip or stories or myths or folklore did- that stuff which was a common well sprung of ideas" (Qtd in Jones and Vinson Pg 145).

Morrison's *Beloved*, a slave narrative pays tribute to the "sixty million and more" slaves who suffered and died during trans-Atlantic journey. Morrison *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a fugitive slave who kills her Baby to save her from the brutalization of slavery. It narrates how Sethe tries to make peace with her traumatic past. Her mother-in-law Baby Suggs is a religious preacher, and she prays and preaches a fervent message of grace and salvation through love. She gathers the black folks of her community, who weep, love, dance, sing, shout at her meetings on the clearing, and try to defeat the sins of slavery, including the horrors and humiliation that they have experienced and suffered as slaves. However, unbearable their past was, Baby Suggs gives a message of hope in her sermon and makes them believe, that God has not forsaken them.

Baby Suggs is interestingly described as an unchurched preacher and she never cites any instances from the Bible to uplift her people, she has evolved her own gospel of love to reach out to her community and teaches them to love themselves. Slavery robbed them of their dignity, and it is this dignity that she tries to regain in her sermon. To quote from her sermon *in Beloved*, "..... in this here place; we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out.... And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them...." (Morrison Pg 104).

Baby Suggs's sermon is remembered even after she has given up preaching, and also after her death. Recalling this sermon in the text is significant, for she remains an all-pervading presence with a message of love and hope, and her call generates multiple communal responses. Baby Suggs's sermon allows the community to remember and

reiterate her message of hope and love on a number of occasions in the novel, and it is meant to heal the community.

Morrison with her exemplary contribution to American literature has also achieved the enormous task of distancing and demystifying the dominant literary tradition, and at the same time helped in revitalizing and remotivating her own culture through her works. Working at the interface between two cultures, she has through the power of her creative imagination cautioned against the political and historical power yielded by the dominant white traditions. In her very profound essay *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison calls for an evaluation of canonical literature produced by White Americans. Morrison depicts the limitations of the academy, that discriminates in their approach to Black and White literature. She feels that American literature is about an unquestioned acceptance of whiteness, and she analyses the lack of pedagogical tools available to study the racialized nature of contemporary discourse. She studies (in *Playing in the Dark* published in 1992) how "literary whiteness" (xii) or "literary blackness" (xii) are constructed. She critiques how the canonical European and American literature relegates the African presence to the margins, or deliberately tries to discredit it. She points out how: "to enforce invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body." (1992, Pg 10)

Morrison points out that like the innumerable ardent but non-academic readers, some major literary critics in the United States too have never read, and are proud to say, any African-American text. "It seems to have done them no harm, presented them with no discernible limitations in the scope of their work or influence. I suspect, with much evidence to support the suspicion, that they will continue to flourish without any knowledge whatsoever of African American literature." (1992, Pg 13).

She goes on to analyse racial issues by reflecting upon the African characters in the works of major American canonical writers whose works are agreed to be indispensable to the curriculum. Morrison exhibits in these works "sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always a choked representation of an Africanist presence." (1992, Pg 17) Morrison feels that the white writers in America excel in the art of using aesthetic and technical devices and rhetorical approaches that are meant to deliberately heighten

racism. She points out that despite the obvious importance of slavery to American history, the major figures in canonical American literature like Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Faulkner, Flaubert, Mary Shelly, Whitman, Wharton, Henry James, T S Eliot, seem to have fairly little interest in race, and that they rarely mention it. The narratives composed by major American writers have been understood by the mainstream literary critics as essentially 'raceless' and 'universal'. Morrison wants to contradict both these claims, by citing instances of negative portrayal given to Blacks in the mainstream literature, and on the contrary for Morrison, race turns out to be a significant issue in the works of these canonical white authors.

Morrison wonderfully expresses her own apprehensions as a Black writer, when she writes:

"Neither blackness nor "people of colour" stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely upon these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people……. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to manoeuvre ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains." (1992, xi)

For Morrison, the very act of evading race in American literature is an act of racism, and is very deliberate on the part Americans.

Morrison's enormous stature as a writer is evident in the overwhelming and profound tributes that came pouring in from major writers on Morrison's passing away. The absence of Morrison is not only an immense void in the lives of the African Americans, but she is looked up as a person who spoke for the rights of the disadvantaged and discriminated minorities and marginal communities, and therefore she has left a huge void in the World Literature. I am dwelling upon some of these tributes that celebrate Morrison's life, and are apt in defining her presence as in the

literary and cultural field. Her friend Oprah Winfrey said: "She was our conscience. Our seer. Our truth-teller. She was a magician with language, who understood the Power of words. She used them to roil us, to wake us, to educate us and help us grapple with our deepest wounds and try to comprehend them." (Qtd in *Democracy Now*, 2019)

Angela Davis wrote:

"I think back to the way in which I imagined slavery before reading *Beloved*, and I realize how abstract that imagination was. She taught us, I think probably for the very first time, to imagine enslaved women and men with full lives, with complex subjectivities, with interiority. And I think that her work has literally revolutionized the way people all over the world think, not only about black people in the U.S., but how they imagine their own lives and their pasts and their futures." (Qtd in *Democracy Now,* 2019)

Jesmyn Ward (she is an American novelist and Professor of English. She won the 2011 National Book Award for Fiction) wrote on Morrison's passing away:

"Toni Morrison wrote to us again and again, exhorting our beauty, making us grapple with our pain, reaffirming our humanity…… She called us forth in her pages and made us experience and understand ourselves with kindness, with deeper knowing of all we had survived, ……. How she sang us to the world! And now that she is gone, how we weep for our Beloved!" (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Tracy K. Smith (former US poet laureate and educator) wrote:

"I don't know if we would have the vocabulary for contemplating the impact of slavery upon contemporary selfhood and nationhood, let alone for speaking publicly about it, were it not for the work of Toni Morrison. Hers was surely the most formidable melding of mind and spirit, of conscience and voice, of intelligence and insight, of justice and reason, of life-and reality-creating *Logos* that America has ever seen." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Mohsin Hamid says:

"I was a student of Toni Morrison's, and that, more than any prize or recognition, has been the greatest honour of my life as a writer. I have never read anyone else like her, not only because her books are so powerful, but because the innovations required to produce them- innovations in form, in language, in authorial stance, in political thought-stand together as a profound achievement, as a sign to all who write of what a human being is capable of." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (a well-known Nigerian writer) remembers Morrison:

"……She was Black and she didn't apologise for her Blackness, and she didn't pander and she didn't temper the painful reality of Black American history, in a country that often seemed keen to minimize it. She stared pain in the face, unblinking. She wrote about what was difficult and what was necessary and in doing so she unearthed for a generation of people a kind of redemption, a kind of relief." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Henry louis Gates Jr (American literary critic, historian, professor) remembers Toni Morrison saying:

"For nearly half a century, we have been looking to Toni Morrison for guidance-to help us think, through literature, as we find our way through the world……By refashioning the trope of The Talking Book in the black vernacular, Toni Morrison dramatically expanded the possibilities of narrative voice, demonstrating that she was the worthy successor to her literary forebears-Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez- taking her rightful place in the tradition of the truly great masters of fictional narrative." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Tayari Jones (well-known American author and academic) wrote:

"Toni Morrison is the greatest chronicler of the American experience that we have ever known….. Now that she is gone and we are facing a moral dilemma greater than any that I have seen in my lifetime, her Nobel acceptance speech is as haunting and urgent as ever. In that speech, she tells the story of an old woman who is taunted by a pack of boys who hold a bird. She is blind, but is known to have second sight, and they challenge her to tell her if the bird is alive or dead. The old woman says simply, "The bird is in your hands." And this in many ways could be her parting message to us now." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Chigozie Obioma (well-known Nigerian writer) writes:

"Morrison herself credited Chinua Achebe for helping her discover "the freedom to write," But it was more a freedom to see that we can tell our own stories and by so doing, lift our people. Myself and a new generation of black writers, encouraged by the great work she has done, will continue to do just that." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Margaret Atwood (well-known Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic and essayist) wrote: "Her strong voice will now be missing in this age of the renewed targeting of minorities in the United States and elsewhere is a tragedy for the rest of us." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Laila Lalami (Moroccan-American novelist and essayist) wrote:

"……. In *Song of Solomon*, her masterpiece, she showed how history is passed down in different ways- in the official documents that those in power leave behind, and in the folktales, legends, family stories, or idle gossip that those without power must cling to. She was that rarest of combinations: a great novelist and a great intellect. …… When I heard she had passed away, I felt immeasurable sadness. What a loss, I thought, what a loss. But then I started considering all the lives she had touched, and changed: her readers, her contemporaries, her students, and an entire generation of writers." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Kevin Young (American poet) writes:

"……she was in the tradition of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, of black and unknown bards and enslaved persons she dared give a name…… She helped us see ourselves, and free ourselves, and remind us that, as she puts it, "The function of freedom is to free someone else." (Qtd in Christensen, 2019)

Toni Morrison has gifted to the world an incredible legacy that we will cherish and continue to celebrate and learn from her. We remember her not only as an accomplished writer, but as a revolutionary political thinker, who used her writing to change the world. Her entire body of work radiates with a spiritual vigour, for she very empathetically makes a case against the injustices and inhumanities against the marginalised. Her theoretical essays are useful not only in evaluating African American literature but they can also provide a significant pedagogical framework for analysing the literature of minorities and marginal communities. Ending this essay with a quote from Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech on 7th December, 1993; "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."

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