TONI MORRISON: A KOHINOOR DIAMOND EMBEDDED IN THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Genius is highly sensitive, unusually intuitive; the super sensitive perception of genius embedded with creative imagination to an outstanding degree, becomes capable of perceiving into the womb of time, giving shape to things yet unborn. In other words, genius by nature is prophetic; a Sophocles, a Shakespeare, a Dostoevsky, a Tolstoy or a Goethe are the rarest gifts of nature to mankind. Ipso facto, they are the torch-bearers of mankind whom they lead, from a state of fumbling, stumbling darkness, into the realm of light. Toni Morrison is such a gift of nature to mankind in general and to African Americans in particular. Genius has no frontiers. Great writers, not only delve deep into the causes of the present state of things, but they also touch the roots of their existence and foresee the shape of things that future slowly but inevitably unfolds. These writers of a rare class throw light on the darker regions of the unrevealed future and give them their name, shape and habitation.

Keywords — genius, champion, black, forerunner, racial discrimination, oppression, Kohinoor diamond

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, whose original name being Chloe Anthony Wofford, was born in Lorain, Ohio to George and Ramah Wofford on February 18, 1931. She is the second of four children. Morrison’s parents lived at first in South; they belonged to sharecropping families and subsequently they migrated to North in pursuit of better living conditions in the early 1900s; and George Wofford, Morrison’s father, had bitter experience in South due to racial discrimination. And these unhappy memories of early life made him cynical towards whites and he developed a sense of distrust of them and this distrustful attitude towards them lasted to the end of his life. Morrison’s father was a man of robust common sense and of practical sagacity. Generally African Americans lived in the midst of the native whites with a sense of risk and suspicion; so her parents instilled in her the value of group loyalty, which was essential to survive the harsh realities of racial tension during that period. Morrison grew up within her own community in Lorain, Ohio, where she could have firm sense of security and reassurance. Fortunately, Morrison was far from the bleak atmosphere that largely prevailed in an area of plantation or ghetto. Although her parents were not much educated, they were, indeed, cultured. Their home was redolent with fairy tales, music, songs, ghost stories and myths. Morrison, even as a child, growing against this kind of background, learnt the language of their African-American heritage.

II. EDUCATION AND LITERARY INTEREST

Morrison, before having a formal education, had received a kind of traditional education at home, important to her through folktales and whatever her elders told the children of their own experiences in the form of stories. Even as a child, Morrison had shown profound love of reading; her parents encouraged her passion for reading, learning, and culture. They had also injected into her a sense of confidence in her own abilities and attributes as woman. Morrison, as an adolescent, exhibited great propensity for classic literature. Even as early as her age of adolescence, she started reading Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy.
In an interview with Jean Strouse, Morrison described her childhood experiences with literature:

“There were books written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio, but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway...they spoke directly to me out of their own specificity” (Stephanie 7).

Morrison was especially impressed by the ability of her favourite authors to identify with and present their own cultural roots. Morrison graduated high school with honours in 1949 and went on to attend Howard University in Washington D.C. It was during this time that Morrison changed her name from “Chloe” to “Toni,” (derived from her middle name, Anthony) so that her name would be easier to pronounce. Morrison was also a member of the Howard Repertory Theatre; their trips to perform gave her the opportunity to observe the African American experience in the South. In 1953, she graduated from Howard University with a bachelor’s in English and a minor in Classics. Morrison went on to pursue graduate studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In 1955, she completed her master’s thesis on the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner and received a Master of Arts.

III. CAREER IN LITERARY WRITING & WORKS

Morrison came back to Howard I 1957 as an English instructor and started working on her own writing. There she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect and fellow faculty member. The couple had two sons: Harold Ford and Slade Morrison. During this period, Morrison joined a small writers’ group as a temporary escape from an unhappy marriage. She needed to be around people who appreciated literature as much as she did. For discussion, each member was required to bring a story or poem. After one week, Morrison had brought nothing, so she quickly wrote a story based on a girl she knew during her childhood who had prayed to God for blue eyes. Although her group enjoyed the story, Morrison put it away, thinking she was done with it. Over that same period the marriage deteriorated, culminating in divorce in 1964. After her divorce, Morrison left Howard University and began working as an associate editor for Random House in Syracuse, New York. While she was working during the day, her housekeeper took care of her two sons. In the evening, Morrison cooked dinner and played with her sons until their bedtime, when she would start writing. She found writing exciting and challenging; she found everything else boring by comparison with the exception of parenting.

In an interview with Nellie McKay, when asked how she managed these responsibilities, her response was:

“Well, I really only do two things...It only looks like many things. All of my work has to do with books. It is all one thing. And the other thing that I do is to raise my children which, as you know; I can only do one minute at a time” (McKay 140).

In 1967, Morrison was transferred to New York where she became a senior editor for Random House. It was during this time when she began to develop the story, she had presented at her literature group. For several years, she tried to get the novel published, but after many rejections, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston accepted “The Bluest Eye” for publication in 1970. From 1971-1972, Morrison became the associate professor of English at the State University of New York while continuing her job at Random House. During this time, Morrison mentored African American women writers, including Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones and compiled and anthologized the works and histories of African-Americans. She also spent her spare time writing her second novel, Sula (1973). The following are the list of the titles of her novels till date: The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), Playing in the Dark (1992), La Cocoon de Salomon (1993), Conversation with Toni Morrison (1994), The Dancing Mind (1996), Paradise (1997), The Big Box (1999), The Book Mean People (2002), Love (2003), Remember the Journey (2004), A Mercy (2008), What Moves at the Marion (2008), Penny Butter Fudge (2009), Home (2012), God Help the Child (2015), Who’s Got Game? The Ant or The Grasshopper? The Lion or the Mouse?

IV. DISCUSSION- THE UNPRECEDENTED GENIUS


Toni Morrison is, beyond all shade of doubt, the most distinguished of contemporary American fiction-writers. The stamp of her genius is visible in every novel of hers. Although the subject matter of her novels is confined to the black community whose cause she stoutly champions and upholds its racial heritage and the wisdom embedded in their folklore, she is not parochial in her attitude to life. Her catholicity of vision embraces humanity as a whole. The beauty of the imperishable values of life is reflected in all her novels that speak eloquently of Toni Morrison’s intuitive grasp of truths about human nature. True genius, by nature, is universal and it has no geographical frontiers and it is above and beyond time and space and, as such, it appeals to one and all. A genius is the property of the whole mankind.

V. CULTURAL AMBASSADOR

Morrison takes to writing novels with a missionary zeal and there is an avowed purpose behind her writings and the purpose is to discover the natural greatness of her race as a repository of ancient wisdom peculiar to that race. She champions the cause of her own race and upholds her racial heritage and hoary culture which the civilized world outside of it (race) is not aware of. She feels proud of her race and totally identifies herself with her people. In a sense, she is the voice of her people and plays the role of a cultural ambassador to the rest of the world. At the back of her writings, there has been a sad sense of being done gross injustice by the white race of America. She is very genuine in her attempt to show that the black people, especially of America, popularly known as African Americans or in no way inferior to the white people. In all her novels, she projects her community of the African Americans and endeavours to establish the formidable identity of her race. She represents her people as men endowed with certain heroic qualities, such as resilience of spirit, perseverance, tenacity of purpose and Promethean patience. In a sense, she represents the intellectual leadership of her community acting as its mentor endeavours to create a new consciousness for the whole community so that it can hold its head high and as a power to reckon with, carving out a distinctive personality of its own in the midst of the white people. She accepts this onerous role gladly and discharges her duty almost as a sacred one in the highest interest of her community. Toni Morrison may justly be termed as the modern prophetess of the whole black community and she richly deserves the appellation of the ‘Kohinoor Diamond’ among the contemporary American writers.

Morrison, as a novelist, feels that her main concern is the true freedom of mind and soul of the African Americans. She has a thorough knowledge of the history of their miserable plight which they suffered for more than three centuries as slaves on this side of the Atlantic. Although the Bill of the Great Emancipation was proclaimed as early as 1865, granting political freedom to the Negro slaves, it remained ineffectual for more than a century. Until 1960’s of the 20th century, these African Americans suffered segregation, discrimination and brutal treatment. Almost to the end of 1970, three centuries of slavery left the black community completely crippled mentally, socially and economically. Racist violence spread like an epidemic, especially, through the length and breadth of the South. Cases of lynching were reported even after mid 20th century.

Agitation on a large scale by African Americans was too frequent during that period. One great historic Civil Rights movement under the dynamic leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1960 had brought about perceptible changes in the American Government in favour of black people and steadily things began to improve after this movement. It is against the mass sufferings of the community that Morrison came onto the literary scene as a novelist around 1970. She started writing with missionary zeal to awaken the people of the community to the immense possibilities life has to offer them.

She claims:

“Beyond the parameters of cognition, I don’t want to sound too mystical about it, but I feel like a conduit. I really do I am fascinated about what it means to make people remember what I don’t even know” (Mohini 132).

Morrison’s chief pursuit in her writings is a search for identity and search for roots. It becomes all the more imperative in the case of African Americans because the dehumanizing process persisted for them so long and that too, in an alien land. Under these miserable circumstances, their survival itself was in question and self-recognition was a forgotten dream.
Toni Morrison has very successfully exposed this perilous situation through her characters like Shadrack, Plum and Deweys.

Then after the Civil Rights Movement and certain other agitations by the American blacks, gradually a new consciousness prevails on them and they try to forget the memories of the past slavery. And protests against any act that aims at the black community have become frequent and these protests are necessary to get rid of even the last vestiges of slavery. No other African American writer has done so much to create a new consciousness in the community for change for better as Morrison has done. In Sula (1973), it is the character of Sula which becomes the harbinger of change. Morrison, by subtle ways, refers to the lifeless existence of the Bottom very often. And the novel begins with the ‘nigger’ joke, forcefully points to the helpless black community trapped by the whites in the name of benevolence. Morrison suggests the need for change within the black community through Sula’s unconventional thought and the changeless conventional practices of the Bottom. Morrison’s chief message is that the conventionally-minded people of the Bottom should “abandon their conditioned modes of belief for building a new future.” Morrison’s next concern as novelist is with the creation of the strength of African American community.

Morrison clearly asserts:

“Maybe I am a little too romantic about what has been possible for blacks like myself who grew up to enormous economic lures yet never were degraded by it. But I have to write about it so that young blacks who never were told about the resiliency of those who preceded them can understand that courage and heroism” (Morrison 40).

The Negroes’ love for nature and the lessons of patience, endurance, and equanimity, learnt from the cycles of nature, was one great succour for African Americans. The continuation of native African folklore and belief, in the power of mother earth and the mystic unseen presences also points to the fact that many slaves embraced Christianity only because of its promise of providing a heavenly home.

The Negro music based on the moods and cadences of Nature was another buttress to their terrorized lives. The strongest truth ingrained in them was to accept good and evil alike because Nature taught them to accept its varying moods and that sunshine and shade are inseparable. This system of thought is manifested through calm acceptance of good and evil alike. This African approach to life is basically a result of a deep communion with Nature.

VI. THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Another gripping feature of Morrison’s art is her ability for storytelling. Native Africans still follow the tradition of Griot. A Griot is a West African poet-cum storyteller, who followed the oral tradition of passing on the culture from generation to generation. The uneducated illiterate African-Americans had received this art as an inheritance and continued to communicate in numerous ways through this oral tradition. This even helped them to codify their rescue plans.

Morrison also conforms to the tricks of oral presentation of tales, a dramatic description of events resembling a feature news story, entertaining and informative at the same time. This explains the participative quality of her novels. The storyteller and listener or reader complements each other by nodding and singing at the same time. Morrison’s novels are interspersed with poetry and poetic prose. The joys and sorrows, alternating in the graphic descriptions, make the reading of these novels a living experience.

These novels are multi-layered, multi-voiced accounts of happenings narrated by a speaker who transfers his excitement, shock, anxiety, anguish, hopes and fears to the listeners simultaneously because of the listener’s rapt attention to the words spoken. Morrison has captured the rhythms of the spoken word which explains the aural quality of her prose.

Most of the novels by Morrison are open ended, which means there is no final verdict on the fate of the people described in the novel. This choice of Morrison leads the reader to think further about the events and people and ruminate about their inter-personal relationships and understanding of life in their peculiar circumstances. In this sense, they can be termed very modern. The author’s opinion is not prescriptive or authoritative; it is an invitation to the reader to share his or her view in a very democratic spirit.
However, the open-endedness of these novels does not preclude them from being old fashioned in their technique of narration. Morrison brings alive the past by her deft handling of details and a gift for the histrionic.

Morrison has again and again expressed her concern for the black community. It is her mission to remind the world about the inhuman treatment meted out to blacks in America. The acme of her effort is Beloved, where Morrison has made use of a true story of Margaret Garner, who tried to kill her children to save them from slavery. The protagonist of this novel, Sethe, represents millions of black women who were forced to consider motherhood a bane. Morrison tries to clarify her choice of re-living the past through this novel.

In one of her interviews, she says:

“Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people
Who have to reappropriate it” (David 29).

Sula also begins with a “nigger joke”. A joke which represents the irony of the Negro fate, where one has to be gracious even when being duped. The tragic drama of black humanity is marked by certain episodes of comic relief. The settlement upon the hills is named Bottom because the white owner proved that it was the bottom of the sky and the freed slave had to be content with that.

VII. SIMPLE DICTION AND RICH IMAGERY

Another device which explains the strength of Morrison as a novelist is her language and style. These novels are written in simple straightforward English with the least use of sophisticated words. Most sentences are short, simple and only sometimes compound and complex sentences are used. They are mostly short, very seldom with more than one subordinate clause. Description of place and people consists of concrete objects and actions with transitive verbs which help the reader to grasp the meaning easily. Copious use of epithets and vivid images of both physical and mental states and emotional state instil a living quality in her prose which may even be called poetic if referred to as ‘emotional apprehension of life.’ An example is not difficult to find.

Morrison’s prose is highly metaphorical but this is not because she craves any ornamental effects, what she aims at is:

“To clear the language and give words back their original meanings, not the one that’s sabotaged by constant use.” If you work very carefully you can clear up ordinary words and repolish them, make parabolic language seem alive again” (Morrison 5).

Through the symbolic representation of the complex mental states, Morrison has helped the reader to realize the muddiness of depending on others for one’s happiness and satisfaction. Contrary to the dejection of Nel, Morrison has pictured the mental state of Sula on her death-bed. Far from being dejected, Sula, though in great physical pain, has a feeling of peace. Quite opposite to the desire of Nel, who missed Jude immensely, Sula wanted to be alone even when she was on her death-bed.

VIII. INTERSPERSING HUMOUR

Other attributes of Morrison as a novelist include her aptitude for coining names and a sense of humour. She shares this peculiarity with Dickens who could give funny but meaningful names to the characters such as the cruel man in David Copperfield called Mudstone or the comical character as Mr. Pickwick. Morrison has amusing place names like ‘Bottom’ in Sula ‘No Doctor Street’ in Song of Solomon. ‘Bottom’ was named for a place up the hill because a white owner had duped a slave into believing that it was the bottom of heaven and people were forbidden to call the street, Doctor Street in Song of Solomon (1977) because the doctor who lived there was black, and, moreover, he was never allowed to enter it; only twice he was permitted to enter it just to admit the white patient, so the blacks called it ‘No Doctor Street’. So the non-violent manner of protest is indicated by naming it ‘No Doctor Street’. Morrison names certain characters in an ironic way, such as Tar Baby for a white man, the Deweys for the poor little black boys who never grew into manhood. ‘President Lincoln’s is the name of a horse and many more such names.

Culture, like language, is always in a state of flux. The perpetual process of assimilation and change in meaning of words goes on. The adoption of these names wittingly or unwittingly points to the dual nature of African American culture. The black Americans have suffered a deep sense of loss because they were robbed of their
native family names. The ironic use of names gives the reader the glimpse of deep hurt and pain in the Negro mind because of this reality.

IX. MAJESTIC PROWESS AND REALISTIC PORTRAYAL

Morrison is good at analysing behaviour and as a novelist she transcends the boundaries of class, colour or creed. In this regard, Morrison becomes a commentator on life who tries to justify the African Americans as human beings, who acted and reacted in certain ways because of the compulsions laid on them. However atrocious the treatment of white Americans may have been towards them, the fact remains “all times shall pass away.” For African American, there was a time for suffering, now is the time for healing. In 1997 on behalf of the whole nation, the American Senate officially apologized to the African Americans for their inhuman sufferings perpetrated by them. It was one hundred and thirty eight years after the ‘Bill of Emancipation’ was passed (1865). Morrison’s message is to end the thoughts and feelings of retribution so that her people might celebrate life anew and feel proud to call themselves African Americans. One may justly conclude this brief account of Toni Morrison as a novelist with the following passage:

“Toni Morrison’s novels reflect her desire to draw on the people, places, language, values, cultural traditions, and politics that have shaped her own life and that of African American people. In so doing, she offers no solutions to problems, nor does she simplify the complex realities of the past or present. Instead, out of respect for the cultural knowledge that black people bring to life, she uses the power and majesty of her imagination to address them and anyone interested in the stories that have created a permanent place for her among America’s greatest writers” (Andrews, Frances and Harris 297).

X. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison is an extraordinary writer who takes to writing with a missionary zeal. She writes books not to entertain people; but to widen the reader’s vision to understand the real significance and purpose of life. She writes with a sense of grave commitment, that is, to convey a profound message to the reader about the complex relationship between man and man and between man and his community.

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