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**FEMINISM AND BLACK NATIONALISM WITH
REFERENCE OF TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS**

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Abstract:

A woman with a pen becomes dangerous for the process of writing provides her with a better insight in to her own thoughts and feeling but also gives her the benefit of freedom and privacy which she could rarely enjoy. Although the first form of woman's writing was in the form of dairy, which recorded their daily lives or some important events, women gradually began to move away from the realms of mundance to the realms of fantasy and mythology. Many of them discovered poetry, which allowed them to express their deepest and most secretive desires and fears, but also to create worlds of their own, world in which they had more freedom and more power.

Each time a woman stands up for herself,

without knowing it possibly,

without claiming it,

she stands up for all women.”

By – Maya Angelou

Toni Morrison is one of the most popular African American author. Her literary and social ideology are often brought into connection with feminism and black nationalism. In her novels we observe that she addressed the complexities of race, gender discrimination and class through her female characters. The present paper tries to focus on feministic Approach in the novels of Toni Morrison. Morrison depicts her female characters adopts the path of survival and later enables her identity from any sort of conventional clutches where women is seen as an object for sexual pleaser or for doing monotonous house hold works of washing cloths or sweeping floors. Morrison express how female suffer and she gives glimpses that women are also a human.

Introduction:

Women have ever been exploited in multiple ways by the so called godlike Man. It is a misconception to give more importance to men come out of the gender politics. Man is considered as a symbol of power and prosperity. When women slightly began to realize the gender politics, the awaking came to them due to their internal urge to gain knowledge through education. There has also been a tradition of denying education to women. Under this



condition very few women secretly began to read books and they realized the severity and intensity of this matter. Such women, who started to sense their overburdened life, tried to give words to their condition.

Toni Morrison known for her three women households' does research on the peculiarities of black women and their needs and problems that differ from those of non- black women. She refers to African heritage when criticising the lifestyle choices blacks have adopted despite the obvious incompatibility between these patterns and their mentality. She is a fierce critic of cultural appropriation that happens in both directions, as she insists on the authenticity of existence. In *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved* she embarks on the task of deconstructing the psyche of socially inadequate females, who are due to life circumstances or their own choice labelled as out cast in their communities. Hence, by observing the individual Morrison, in fact, makes references to the pathology and deviation of entire communities which have become, resilient to empathy and acceptance.

The women's issues in Feminism:

The feminist movement as a political cause is closely linked to feminist literature and literary criticism that serve as its documents and manifestos. One of the first areas where gender inequality is directly addressed is undoubtedly literature, with the already mentioned female authors who lamented their lives that denied them the opportunity to create art as freely as men did. These accounts could not but make reference to history and politics that constructed the power relations and those gradually gave birth to the political agenda of feminism.

Any serious discussion on feminism inevitably leads to the question what feminism exactly stands for. It must be said that this movement has gained a great deal of attention in the general public, which led to its popularisation but also rendered diverse versions of its agenda. Namely, today's insistence on human rights that are advocated and protected by many organisations, especially in the West, has turned freedom and equality into a catchphrase, often used without any understanding of what it actually involves. However, it seems that feminism became an especially interesting subject in popular culture, which gave to it new shades of meaning. Nevertheless, despite the significant numbers of supporters, feminism still faces a fierce opposition that sees it as a hostile organisation that aims at



distorting the social system by erasing or disfiguring the notions of marriage, family, heterosexuality, childbearing, etc.

Toni Morrison's Authorship:

Toni Morrison produced some ground-breaking literary work during her prolific career, in terms of both, content and style, writing compelling stories about the lives of those on the margins of society - blacks and women. She is a winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize (1988) and the Nobel Prize for literature (1993). Her work was welcomed by critics and readers, being a compact mélange of art and politics. Besides novels, she is most acclaimed for, Morrison also produced critical works, such as *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, wrote books for children and delivered numerous memorable speeches. In *Playing in the Dark* and *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* she reflects on her experience of being a writer, but also looks into the treatment of black identity in American fiction. She embarks on a search for the ways of creating and erasing identities and is determined to reveal how literature condoned or opposed discrimination. Her focus is set on the group perhaps the most discriminated against - black women. Their lives, in which they must deal with racial and sexual discrimination on a daily basis, provided an excellent foundation for Morrison's literary agenda. Apart from being a successful artist, Morrison is also a very perceptive observer and critic of social trends and politics. Her novels and literary criticism dwell on the issues of oppression, cultural appropriation and stereotyping. Singled out for its fierce commentaries on oppressive power hegemonies, her literary and social ideology are often brought into connection with feminism and black nationalism.

Morrison tackles the problem of being a female author nowadays, a black woman author, to be precise. Most of her novels feature female protagonists, which reveals her special interest in the construction of female psyche. She usually places her heroines in all-women communities in order to explore relationships between women, primarily the mother-daughter relationship and female friendship. Her female characters are bold, audacious and often border on madness. Their actions are contested by the wider community as they refuse to comply with strictly defined gender roles. Their rebellious nature is often seen as unearthly and demonic so they are excellent examples of social labelling of women as 'monsters' or



'witches'- the labels most often associated with free-thinking women. Careful reading of her work reveals common features and recurrent motifs, such as the ambivalence of motherhood, the complex nature of female friendships, mythical power and social powerlessness of women, traumatic effects of repressed memory, haunted past, residual effects of slavery, etc.

Feminism and Black nationalism in Morrison's Novels:

Morrison's heroines are typically young women who fight with remnants of their oppressive past, both in real life and in their souls and are also discarded by the black community and other black women for their contempt of the black imitation of the white man's patterns of life. They do not conform to the expectations of their communities and do not wish to fulfill the stereotypical gender roles. They are bold enough to give their personal definitions of freedom and happiness that do not necessarily include marriage, family and motherhood. The women in Morrison's fiction establish all-women households where they live with their mothers, grand-mothers and sisters, thus revealing the dynamics of these relationships. Although she does not express any contempt of men, Morrison gives them little space and focuses on the conflicts between women, instead. Indeed, her heroines do not seem to be held in check by men, but by other women's judgment and resentment. Hence, she writes about envy, possessiveness, pride and the insistence on Christian Puritanism, which torment women and leave virtually no space for the freedom of thought. Perhaps even stronger than in the case of white women is the stereotype of a black homemaker. Known as extremely obedient and diligent, black women were praised as house help in homes of wealthy white people, like **Pauline Breedlove** in *The Bluest Eye*. As the novel suggests, having no other options for decent employment, black women enjoyed working in other people's households because it gave them an opportunity to get some recognition for their work, recognition they almost never received at home. Working as housekeepers, they acquired some insight into the world of white people, and could for a short time.

Morrison insists on the female unity and friendship, which is evident in the ending of the novels *Love and Sula*. In order to counter the importance placed on the institution of marriage in the Euro-American world, she demonstrates how these women have found their actual soulmates not in their husbands but in each other. However, brainwashed by the Western pattern of happiness, they fail to acknowledge that and are deprived of each other's

love. Desperately attempting to meet the demands society has put on them, they usually take on two patterns of behaviour. Either they try to play the role of a perfect wife and mother or they opt for a life of defiance and experimentation, both of which leave them unsatisfied and emotionally drained. The best example would be the characters of **Nel and Sula**, who try to deal with the limitations of their race and gender in completely different ways and at the end both seem unhappy. Their destinies show that the options for women at that time were rather limited in scope since they could choose only between a life of selfless sacrifice or a life of selfish defiance that involved being labelled with a scarlet letter. In her dealing with the subject of victimisation, Morrison seeks to expose all the ways and social norms that oppress women and suggests that the oppression of and aggression towards them take place on many levels and are psychologically much more difficult to overcome than those men face. As a case in point, **Seth** points out the horrors of being a female slave. "(...) by focusing on every phase of a slave woman's life, from infancy to childhood, from girlhood to motherhood, and on to old age, **Beloved** makes brutally clear that aside from the 'equality of oppression' that black men and women suffered, black women were also oppressed as women." (Grewal, 1996) Besides the regular toil and inhumane life conditions, slave women were also exposed to sexual harassment, abuse and humiliation.

The primary dimension that distinguishes women from men and especially marks the female body is motherhood. It is the only power given to women that is denied to men. It is the natural order that cannot be contested by the force of patriarchal law. It is the power that sometimes emerges in the form of a blessing and sometimes it comes as a curse or punishment. Motherhood is a woman's privilege that simultaneously imposes rules and expectations. Nonetheless, it is the power that gave rise to mythical depictions of women as goddesses, witches or even monsters. The motif of motherhood is a recurrent one in mythology, from the love of Demetra for her daughter Persephone, she could not let go, to the evil mother, Kali. Morrison depicts motherhood realistically, without any pretence of idealism or sugarcoating. She represents it as the deepest love and a life-long connection but also as a sacrifice not every woman is ready to make.

Morrison also openly writes about women who do not wish to **become mothers** and decide to build their own personalities instead. A case in point is Sula, who dismisses her grandmother's suggestions to marry and start a family by replying, "I don't want to make somebody



else, I want to make myself." however, is Sethe's decision to murder her own children so as to save them from becoming slaves. Her determination not to define herself as a breeder of slaves was so strong that she rather chose death for her children. Her act of madness is a painful testimony of the psychological horrors of slavery that made her choose death over it. Morrison's heroines have to find ways of dealing with loss, personal and the inherited one. They have to deal with the demons from the past, brought about by the traumatic experiences of their enslaved ancestors.

Another issue Morrison is trying to deconstruct in her novels is **female sexuality**. As women, her heroines are forced to give their sexuality some purpose. Those who decide to abide by the social norms, have children, like Nel, while others might seek meaning and fulfillment in promiscuity, like Sula. Some of them have liberal definitions of sexuality, like Sula's mother, Hannah, but the biggest sin of all that the black community does not ever pardon is having sexual relations with white men. That act is the most despised one and it made Sula the target of all the wrath the community was capable of. It made people stay away from her like she was infected by plague or was the devil himself. They interpreted her actions as the repudiation and mockery of their national pride, they were building up for centuries. It is yet another proof that a woman's sexuality is considered to be public, since the ways one employs it seem to have the power to offend, enrage or embarrass the entire community. By contrast, male bodies and sexuality are rarely a topic of any conversation or public consideration, except in a playful or boastful way. Male sexuality is seen as yet another task they should perform, the more the better, and by doing so, prove their normality. Male promiscuity fits the pattern of a powerful, masculine, determined man who is in control. In control of what or who? And what is the connection between a man's sexual urge and his desire to establish control? However, the fact that female sexuality is susceptible to public scrutiny has led Sula to use it in order to make a statement - a statement of reclaiming her body and ignoring the rules imposed on women. It was already mentioned that Morrison's female characters live in female communities and are linked with mythical descriptions of women, with the special emphasis on the characters of grandmothers who are thought to have supernatural powers or knowledge of rituals and laws of nature, like **Baby Suggs** in *Beloved*, or are seen as ordinary but very powerful characters, like **Eva** in *Sula*. They are worshiped by entire communities and their houses are places of gatherings, where people come asking for

help when in need. These characters are portrayed as some kind of female priestess, endowed with special powers of understanding and healing others. What is more, they are the ones who establish homes for their families and build life from nothing. It could be argued that in this respect they indeed deserve the label of 'miracle-workers'. The perfect example of the detrimental effect of the racially coloured popular trends is the self-hatred of **Pocola's** (*The Bluest Eye*), which later transformed into madness. Surrounded by products, such as dolls and sweets loaded with ideological messages of the white consumer society, Pecola realises her image does not fit the standards of beauty or popularity and consequently, does not manage to establish and maintain the feeling of self-worth. Seeing hatred in everybody else's eyes, she developed it herself. Her self-loathing culminated as severe madness when she started imagining she had blue eyes and talking to herself. Her only hope of acceptance was to somehow get blue eyes as those of Shirley Temple, who everybody loved. "

Conclusion:

Morrison is open about her audience and says that she is writing for black women. As a primary reason, she cites her own experience of being a black woman, which she cannot distance herself from when writing. Although she does not hold any grudges toward white women, she is among the black female authors who believe that traditional feminism is actually white feminism that failed to address problems of black women. She also looks back on her personal experience of being a woman writer and comments, "I am valuable as a writer because I am a woman, because women, it seems to me, have some special knowledge about certain things." (McKey in Peach, 2000: 13) Indeed, Morrison places significant emphasis on the special kind of knowledge and power women have access to throughout her novels. Her characters absorb knowledge from myths and their connections with forces of nature and inner instincts. Besides describing the particularity of being a woman writer.



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