

Toni Morrison in Afro American Literature

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ABSTRACT

Afro American literature mirrors the past of the Afro Americans in the United States. It is written by the descendants from Afro Americans who are of African origins. Its literature focuses on themes which interest black people such as their roles within the larger American society and issues such as culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom and equality. The novelist that has been examined in this paper is Toni Morrison. This paper also analyzes the contributions made by Toni Morrison to Afro American Literature, such as novels, plays, children's literature, as well as the awards she has received.

KEYWORDS

Afro-American; Children Literature; Freedom; Equality.

America is a land of opportunities, and lot of people arrive with the dream. As such Africans came, not as chattel slaves but as indentured servants, to satisfy the increasing labour demands and released after their agreement period. They have been great story tellers before they arrived in James Town, Virginia in 1619 and they used to pass their history through folklore and storytelling as they were uneducated. As the number of free slaves increased they took the initial step for the development of the black community. The freed blacks preferred to be called as coloured instead as blacks. Some blacks lived in poverty while became successful in their business. Though they have played a major role in laying the economic foundations of the Southern American States, yet they have been denied of equality and seen only as the inferior race by the whites. Gradually they understood that education is a path to economic success, moral improvement and

personal happiness. By the middle of the eighteenth century black writers began to write using the language of the whites around them. Edward stated, "Black Americans wrote like other Americans, that what interested them is much the same as what interested other American authors". (Margolies, 1991: 105).

The first writing of the blacks in America has been autobiographical written by Olaudah Equiano and is known as the Slave Narrative. It gives an account of his native land and the horrors of his captivity and enslavement in the West Indies. Jupiter Hammon, is a slave, and his poem "An Evening Thought" was the first poem published by a black man in America. Phillis Wheatley is the first African-American and the second woman to publish a book in the colonies as well as the first writer to use an epistolary style.

The first black novel was *Clotel* or *The President's Daughter* (1853) written

by William Wells Brown, but it is not considered as the first African American novel published in the United States as it has been published in England. This honour goes to Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig* (1859). The migration in the United States began during the World War I and reached its high point during World War II. At the time of the migration many blacks begin to move from Southern side to northern side for better opportunities and for the greater freedom and also to escape from the southern racism. Slowly they began to enter the mainstream and in the beginning of the 1970's their books are read by both the black and the white audiences. During this period black women began to achieve success as novelist, poets, writers and artists. The most important writers of this time are Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Alex Haley, Toni Cade Bambara, Ishmael Reed, August Wilson, Rita Dove and Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison has "helped to define two decades of African American literary history" (Wall, 2007: 139). She seizes a vital place in the American literary canon. As a writer, she is a positive role-model for minorities who want to practice their career in writing. She is the first Afro American woman writer to receive the Noble Prize in Literature. Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1974) was nominated for a National Book Award. Her third book, *Song of Solomon* (1977), won her a National Book Critics Circle Award in the year 1977 and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. She has also won the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for her fiction *Beloved* in the year 1988. She is also the recipient of the 1994 Pearl Buck Award and the 1996 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. She has received the National Arts and Humanities Award from President Bill Clinton in Washington, D.C. in the year 2001.

In all of her works, she recalls the historical or mythical past as well as the

roles of the eccentric, rejected, orphaned, deformed, and mentally ill. Jill Matus perceives Morrison as one who shapes the "cultural memory of the past [...] offer[ing] readers different ways of relating to the past and the future and therefore of being in history" (Matus, 1998: 3). Matus concedes the responsibility placed on an author when dealing with history. Morrison grew up in Lorain, Ohio and brought up with such a feeling that how the migrant families were with the strong distrust of the whites. She personally did not experience anything but she is able to connect her readers to the feelings of the people in her own community surrounding these experiences. This was made possible by the help of folklore, music, myths, terrifying ghost stories and thrilling tales of Africans who could fly; stories that she had heard from her ancestors while she was growing up, became an important part of her works.

Morrison has been a novelist, playwright, editor and educator. She has written children's Literature as *The Big Box* (1999), *The Book of Mean People* (2002) and *Peeny Butter Fudge* (2009). She has authored for a short fiction called *Recitatif* in the year 1983. She has also written plays: *Dreaming Emmett* and *Desdemona* and non-fiction *The Black Book* (1974), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004), *Burn this Book: Essay Anthology* (2009). She is also a great novelist and has written ten novels. They are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), and *Home* (2012). According to Ron David, "Morrison's books are like the ocean: the surface is beautiful but everything that gives them life is underneath" (David, 2000: 4).

Morrison focuses on the conflicts of the Afro Americans in the American society. It is of two types. They are external

and internal. The external conflict refers to the white versus blacks in the American society. They are considered as inferior race and reduced to subaltern position by the whites. They felt isolated in a new world of colour and new culture. They are struggling to get the equality from the whites because they are not absorbed by the mainstream. The internal conflict refers to the conflict within the black community. Not only with the whites but also with the blacks they have to struggle because there is no unity among them.

The various conflicts that exist in the Afro American society are human versus animal discourse, limitations imposed by the society, violence against the blacks, laws not in favour of blacks, disrespect of the blacks, whites interfering in the marriage life of

the blacks, humiliation and inconveniences faced by the blacks, economic opportunities denied to blacks, parents abusing the children, frustration and helplessness, middle class versus the lower class, abandonment, light skin versus the dark skin, society's abuse, powerless and despair symbolised by flight and cruelty of blacks towards other blacks.

Morrison through her ten novels converses about these conflicts that exist in her society, as well as how they struggle for equality not only with the whites but also with their own black community.

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